

Karl G. Maeser's German Background, 1828–1856: The Making of Zion's Teacher

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There is a fuller and more immediate effectiveness of a great spirit than that possible through his works. These show only a part of his being. The entirety flows pure and wholly through his living personal self. In a way which cannot be proved in detail, nor investigated, nor even wholly thought, his real self is taken up by his contemporaries and handed on to generations to follow. It is this quiet and—it cannot be otherwise described—magical effect of great spiritual natures that carries an ever growing thought from generation to generation, from nation to nation, and allows it to rise with ever greater might and extension.

Written works—literature—then take it mummified, as it were, over those gaps which the living effectiveness can no longer leap.¹

Humboldt's characterization of the effective teacher is surely true of a transplanted German, Karl G. Maeser, who at forty-eight years of age, came to Provo in 1876 at the request of Brigham Young to give new impetus to the Brigham Young Academy and to provide it with the proper academic and religious balance. Contemporaries and succeeding generations alike have properly recognized Maeser as BYU's "spiritual architect,"² one whose

1. Wilhelm von Humboldt, From "Ueber Schiller und den Gang seiner Geistesentwicklung," in Marianne Cowan, ed. and trans., *Humanist without Portfolio* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 164.

2. Ernest L. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University: The First Hundred Years* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), p. 77ff. Maeser was praised by President Francis M. Lyman ("Dr. Karl G. Maeser has done for me directly and indirectly through my children more good than any other educator"); Charles W. Nibley ("I could sit in the dust at the feet of this man"); President Heber J. Grant (who said Brother Maeser was one of three people [his mother

work was highly valued by the Church Authorities, for he not only turned out educated men and women, but turned them out Latter-day Saints, prepared alike for the ordinary duties of life, the work of the schoolroom and the labors of the mission field.³

A portrait of Maeser's Brigham Young Academy in its earliest years reveals a small group of committed Saints lovingly nurturing the fledgling institution through practical struggles for existence while at the same time charting its unique spiritual-intellectual course within the Great Basin Kingdom. The list of devoted supporters is long; then, as now, it included faculty, trustees, administrators, and students, each offering his own talents and training for the benefit of the whole. To be taught were the James E. Talmages, Josiah Hickmans, N. L. Nelsons, George Sutherlands, Amy Brown Lymans, and countless other eager and not-so-eager students. To provide the funds there were Brigham Young himself (although not for long), Abraham O. Smoot, Harvey Cluff, Uncle Jesse Knight, and others who believed in the enterprise and were willing to sacrifice for it.

But while we often pay tribute to this teacher whom sensitive students like Talmage and Nelson admired to the point of hero worship,⁴

and John R. Winder were the other two] who were getting along in years whom he hoped would still be alive when he returned from his mission to Japan); and Senator Reed Smoot ("His undoubted faith in God, his unselfish devotion to a knowledge of his profession, his spirit of self-sacrifice together with a powerful personal magnetism, softened with a true love and personal interest in every student are characteristics that won my love and admiration for Dr Karl G Maeser"). Other similar tributes are in "Dr. Karl G Maeser Memorial," *Brigham Young University Quarterly*, Volume 3 (1 February 1907) and Volume 31 (1 November 1934)

3. Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1904), 4:328.

4. In a speech at Maeser's birthplace in Vorbrucke near Meissen, Saxonon, 19 November 1926, President James E. Talmage of the European Mission recalled his relationship with Maeser years before: "... Together we have hungered and eaten, thirsted and drunk. In periods of quiet converse sanctified by such love and trust as would be fitting between father and son, Karl G. Maeser has told and taught me the way of repentance and the indispensability thereof. . . ." "In Honor of Dr. Karl G. Maeser," *Millennial Star* 88 (9 December 1926):773.

In 1919, in response to a request to evaluate what parts of Brother Maeser's legacy to the Church schools should be retained, N. L. Nelson described his relationship to his mentor: "And I who revered Bro. Maeser as perhaps no mere son could have done; who for a dozen intimate years was his secretary, and was even chosen when he wanted things done; I who listened breathlessly to his every word, and never really outgrew the awe I first had for him as a boy—am

little has been known of those sources of Maeser's character, world view, and educational philosophy which qualified him for the trusted calling he received and which formed the basis for his later success as a teacher in Zion.⁵ It is the purpose of this essay to illuminate his European background to attempt to put his life's work in historical perspective.

The traditional picture of Maeser's early life depicting him as an "authoritarian Prussian aristocrat," educated in the best of Germany's schools, a "professor," one of that country's "intellectual elite," "one of its foremost educators" who gave up wealth, position, and prestige to come to America for the gospel's sake is, at best, an incomplete and distorted stereotype understandably fashioned by grateful family and students whose understanding of the realities of nineteenth century Germany's education and culture was colored primarily by their own frontier experiences.⁶ What seemed "aristocratic" or "intellectually elite" in the valleys of the Wasatch was not necessarily so in a Germany basking in worldwide cultural and educational preeminence. Moreover, Maeser himself may have wittingly and unwittingly contributed to this image of his past in the minds of his Utah contemporaries by the absence of his own written firsthand accounts of his early life, his Kissinger-like German accent, the external authoritarian bearing, his unforgettably-formal frock coat, and a touch of his own forgivable vanity.⁷ In any

not unworthy, I hope, to take up this challenge." N. L. Nelson to David O. McKay, 27 June 1919, David O. McKay Papers, Church Historical Department.

5. Maeser's biography by his son, Reinhard, devotes a scant twelve pages to his German background. See Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928), pp. 9–21.

6. Wilkinson, *BYU*, pp. 81–84. "Dr. Maeser's Legacy to the Church Schools," *Brigham Young University Quarterly* 1 (1 February 1906), is an excellent example of misrepresentation of Maeser's training, social and educational status. See also R. Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser*, p. 11; Mabel Maeser Tanner, "Karl G. Maeser, My Grandfather," Maeser File, BYU Archives. Alma P. Burton quotes a statement by N. L. Nelson which seriously overstates Maeser's standing in the German academic community. Alma P. Burton, *Karl G. Maeser* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), p. 10.

7. In presenting his complete picture of Brother Maeser, N. L. Nelson wrote: "Considering how deeply his life and ideals helped to shape my own, I am loath to record one other instance [in addition to irascibility] of weakness, especially in his declining years. His work as an educator had borne such exceptional traits in character, that wherever he went he became the object of extravagant praise. And he liked it. Adulation became the nectar to which he looked forward on every occasion. Illustrations of how sweet it became to him would be

case, when Maeser arrived in Provo, he brought a philosophy of life and education which derived from a happy marriage of his German experiences and training, and the philosophical and metaphysical truths of the gospel to form in him a whole man and a whole philosophy of education in the Mormon context. His lifelong friend, fellow teacher, and brother-in-law, Eduard Schoenfeld, has correctly pointed out how both elements, united for the first time, gave Maeser the ideal purpose and meaning to his own life as well as to what he thought mankind could become if they could receive this complete form of education.⁸ Maeser not only experienced a kind of intellectual and existential joy from his whole philosophy of life, but he also saw it as a principle for the perfectibility of mankind. If Maeser later on appeared to be rigid when confronted with the pedagogical reform ideas of his successors, his reluctance was probably actuated as much by a conviction of having discovered certain philosophical and pedagogical “absolutes” as by personal intransigence or obstinacy.⁹ Finally, Maeser’s own, by German standards, “inferior” kind of academic training ironically prepared him better for the later achievement in the pioneer society in America than it would have in his native Germany. Here he was able to implement the ideas derived from his philosophical mentors, Humboldt, Goethe, Schiller, Hegel, and the classical idealists of the late Enlightenment, as well as the “radical” pedagogical notions of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and his disciples, Friedrich Froebel and Jean Herbart. Had Maeser received the usual German university education of the nineteenth century instead of the “second-class” normal-school preparation then frowned upon in Germany, he would, along with hundreds of other teachers, have fallen victim to the specialization, relativism, and amoral

cruel to his memory; and indeed, which of us under like circumstances would remember Christ’s admonition: ‘Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth!’” N. L. Nelson to David O. McKay, 27 June 1919. Mabel Maeser Tanner quotes from her grandfather’s diary (which has not been found) an observation which gives an inflated view of his status in Germany: “Impressions of extreme unfriendliness [toward the Mormons] had grown up in this land as elsewhere and yet, in the home of us prominent educators in the center of this cultural center of the Kingdom of Saxony, we men of community standing were entertaining them and listening respectfully as the principles of this unpopular Gospel were expounded to us.” Mabel Tanner, “My Grandfather.”

8. Eduard Schoenfeld, “Dr. Karl G. Maeser,” *Liahona: The Elders Journal* 9 (1 August 1911):82.

9. Nelson to McKay, 27 June 1919.

value structure which, at the time, was the pride and later the bane of the German educational system. With the addition of Mormonism's certainty of God's existence and the moral principles deriving therefrom, Maeser was prepared, like an educational Don Quixote, to offer all students, old and young, rich and poor, gifted and slow, the education of the whole man, which, as both his mentors and he envisioned, would bring freedom and dignity to each human being.

Maeser's beginnings in Germany were neither Prussian nor aristocratic. Born 16 January 1828 to unmarried¹⁰ lower middle class Lutheran parents in Vorbrücke, a village adjacent to the famous porcelain manufacturing town of Meissen (a town of some seven thousand where Maesers had lived as peasants and artisans since the Reformation), Carl (he spelled his name this way until he was a teenager) was the oldest of four sons of Johann Gottfried and Hanna Christiana Zocher Maeser. As was the custom for people of their station, grandparents, parents, and children all lived together in the Zocher home (where his father had first come as a boarder) until after Carl left home at age eleven to attend school in the Saxon capital of Dresden, fifteen miles away.

Maeser's father was a porcelain painter-artisan at the nearby plant who, according to family tradition, believed he could have become a famous artist had he not "painted for bread too soon."¹¹ Although painter-artisans at the factory were relatively numerous (the quality of the porcelain had declined from its eighteenth century apogee) and were paid relatively low wages,¹² the prosperity which came to the entire Saxon economy and to the porcelain industry after Saxony joined the

10. The documents of the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of St. John, in the Coelln parish record (p. 340, first entry) that Carl Gottfried Maeser was born on Wednesday, 16 January 1828. "The father was said to be Johann Gottfried Maeser, painter in the manufacturing [porcelain] plant in Meissen." The same records show that Maeser's parents were married "Sunday, 10 January, 1830" in the same church. *Staatsarchiv Dresden*, Band AA, 414, p. V. This type of so-called "cavalier indiscretion was common at the time among the lower and lower middle class families throughout Europe. All translations by the author.

11. R. Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser*, p. 13.

12. Porcelain painters at the time were considered more artisans than artists. Of the 354 workers employed in the factory, 121 were considered "painters." After the Napoleonic Wars, Saxony was required to pay war debts in the amount of seven million taler. Assessments were made according to income. In Meissen an Arkanist paid four taler, a painter six groschen, and a laborer two groschen. Otto Walcha, *Meissner Porzellan*, Hrsg. v. Helmeunt Reibig (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1973), pp. 179, 185.

Prussian Customs Union in 1831 plus the earnings of father, grandfather, and later his mother's brother, Fritz, were sufficient to meet the family's modest but growing financial needs. The family was traditionally Lutheran, attending to the usual obligations of membership including pride in Martin Luther, their native son, and gratitude that they were not Catholic. That Maeser, unlike many of his intellectual contemporaries, never seriously entertained even in his earnest "searching years" becoming a Catholic was at least partially due to the religious influence of family and community.¹³ Home life centered on the extended family relationship with little evidence to suggest unusual education or culture. As a child Carl was such an avid reader that he became temporarily blind from it at the age of eleven, although he had little more than the Bible and an almanac to enjoy.¹⁴ During those years, the Maeser family grew with the addition of three other sons born between 1830 and 1835, although the two middle boys, Heinrich and Hermann, died before the decade was over.

The schools in Meissen had an excellent reputation. Here Carl received the standard curricular fare of most elementary schools in Prussia, Hessen, and Saxony. Of the regular thirty-hour weekly instruction in the lower, middle, and upper grades, nine hours were spent on German, mostly grammar, four hours on religion, five hours for mathematics (arithmetic and geometry) and the rest divided among drawing, science, history, geography, gymnastics or needlework, and singing.¹⁵ However, at the apparent insistence of his paternal grandmother, in 1837 or 1838 it was decided to send young Carl to Dresden to live with relatives, the Draches,¹⁶ respected middle-class artisans living near the famous old Latin school, the *Kreuzschule*, only recently converted into a

13. The Age of Romanticism, as a reaction to the faithless Enlightenment and the French Revolution it had helped spawn, turned many intellectuals, including the Schlegel brothers and Chateaubriand to Catholicism in search of refuge from political and social turmoil. See John Halsted, ed., *Romanticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 17ff.

14. R. Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser*, p. 11.

15. Levi Seeley, *The Common School System of Germany and its Lessons for America* (New York: E. L. Kellogg, 1896), pp. 91–92.

16. The *Adressbücher* of Dresden for the years 1848–1851 list three Drache families living at the same address, *Kreuzkirche* 10. They were: Adolf Drache, bookbinder for the royal court; Gottlieb Ludwig Drache, porcelain painter; and Gustav Julius Drache, accountant. *Stadtarchiv Dresden, Adressbücher der Stadt Dresden*.

more modern preparatory school (*Gymnasium*), where he could attend the school and obtain an education superior to that available in Meissen. There Carl was to receive the bulk of his formal education between 1838 and 1846 before enrolling in the Friedrichstadt Normal School program to become a teacher.

Although the distance from home in Meissen to Dresden was ridiculously short, a whole new world opened up to the inquisitive ten year old boy. Dresden was the capital of royal Saxony where Frederick August II presided over a sumptuous court and state rich in tradition, but politically dwarfed between two stronger neighbors, Austria and Prussia. Here, too, was the artistic and cultural center of all Germany with architectural achievements and art collections to enhance its reputation. Moreover, although Dresden lacked the intellectual prominence of Leipzig, the other Saxon city to the north, it was more than alive to the political, social, economic, religious, and philosophical stirrings which fermented beneath the placid philistine Biedermeier surface. In the late 1830s Saxons were still smarting under the division of the old kingdom at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which resulted as punishment by the great powers—Russia, Austria, and England—for the Saxons' collaboration with the hated Napoleon scarcely two decades earlier. Saxony was also a prominent spawning ground among the youth and intellectuals for a freer, more liberal society, transcending even the liberties granted in the Constitution of 1831, and for the unification of all German states into a single, liberal German nation-state. Such an institution, Saxons reasoned, would end the hegemony of the arrogant, disliked Prussians to the north and the foreign Catholic Austrians on the south. That young Karl, like the overwhelming majority of the educated youth of his day, was influenced by these political currents is clear from later comments of students as well as by the prominent place the ideals of political liberty had in his own philosophy.¹⁷

17. Erastus Nielsen noted that Maeser actively supported the "Liberal or Constitutional" party during the revolutionary years of the forties. His whole philosophy of education was based on the freedom and dignity of the individual as had been taught by the German humanists. See Karl G. Maeser, *School and Fireside* (Provo: Skelton, 1898), pp. 32, 352. There was a heavy concentration of academics and students in the Liberal party, while fewer found their way into the ranks of both the Conservatives and the Democrats. See Heinz-Georg Hollmack, *Untersuchungen Zur Geschichte der Reaktion in Sachsen, 1849–1855* (Berlin: Matthiesen Verlag, 1931), p. 10.

Equally significant for the Saxony of Maeser's youth were the economic and social changes which were transforming it from a primarily agricultural into a more industrialized and commercial society. These, together with the revolutionary increase in population, produced pressures for greater productivity throughout the land while challenging the time-honored sociopolitical domination of the landed aristocracy.¹⁸ By the early 1840s an enlarged middle class, composed of industrialists, businessmen, academics, and students, augmented by artisans declassed by the emergence of the factory system, joined with an increasingly self-conscious industrial working class to revise the old order, peacefully, if possible, violently, if necessary. Karl G. Maeser thus grew up in the same Germany that produced both Otto von Bismarck and Karl Marx, but, while influenced by some of the same forces which helped fashion their ideas, followed a different course which in the long run might have a power similar to theirs.

The most direct influence during those years, however, came from his school experience. This same *Kreuzschule* had not only taught many scions of the local nobility and upper bourgeoisie their Latin and Greek, but only a few years earlier had permitted Richard Wagner to daydream his adolescent years through its classes. Its objective was to provide in both formal and substantial respects the preparation for the independent study of the arts and sciences (*Wissenschaften*) through a well-rounded humanistic and especially classical education.¹⁹ This preparation was for the university training which followed for all who graduated from its program. The educational ideal was to be Greek, Christian, and German, the attempt being to harmonize Greek philosophical ideals with Christian principles, particularly through the study of Greek and Latin in connection with history and mathematics.²⁰ All of this was to be taught within the framework of a growing German nationalism. Students were required to complete six classes of one and one-half years each, with the first three years having not more than thirty-six hours of instruction weekly and going down to thirty-four and thirty-two hours in the subsequent three year segments, with no time credit given for

18. Prior to 1840, Saxon population grew one percent *per year* and nineteen percent between 1815–1840. See Rudolf Koetzsche and Hellmut Kretzschmar, *Saechsische Geschichte* 2 vols. (Dresden: C. Heinrich, 1935), 2:140.

19. Friedrich Paulsen, *Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts . . .*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1921), 2:354–355, 518519.

20. *Ibid.*

gymnastics, singing, or orthography.²¹ Eight to ten hours were devoted to Latin, six to Greek, six to mathematics and the natural sciences, and two or three hours to religion, German, history, geography, and French. In order to graduate, students were required to read the classical authors and to be able to speak and write reasonably well. In Greek they were expected to know Plato and Demosthenes and to read the easier parts of the tragedians.²² They were also required to present Latin essays in the upper classes as well as a translation into Greek plus individual creative works in French, German, and mathematics. Every month each student was to inform his teacher of the study he had done on his own and to welcome the teacher into his room to see what he had been doing with his spare time. All of this was according to the laws governing education

21. While all *Gymnasia* included music in the curriculum, the *Kreuzschule* featured a traditionally excellent boys' choir from the best singers among them. Undoubtedly Maeser belonged and may even have received a small stipend for his musical ability. In any event, the choir would go from house to house each Sunday "caroling" and the serenaded citizens would reward the singers with a donation which went to pay for their education. The choir also presented an evening vespers service in their resident church, the *Kreuzkirche*, each Saturday evening at six o'clock. Here Maeser not only developed his musical talents, but also his religious and spiritual awareness. Edith Krause (Prenzlau, German Democratic Republic) to Douglas L. Tobler, 20 October 1975.

22. Paulsen, *Geschichte*, p. 519. The stereotype of Prussian or German school discipline has also been heavily distorted. Not only was there the Humboldtian tradition rejecting rote memorization, but the Pestalozzian concept of love and object-teaching made considerable headway during the nineteenth century. Maeser was a product of this pedagogy; discipline did not mean brutality; the demand for excellence did not exclude love and compassion. Testimonies from his former students to this effect are legion.

"We know that the impression prevails among Americans that German teachers 'spare not the rod,' and that their manner of discipline is severe, if not brutal. A series of visits running into the hundreds, covering all classes of schools in all parts of Germany, and during a period of four years, does not bear out that view of the case. On the contrary, the spirit of the great body of teachers is that of kindly and human interest, affectionate solicitude for moral growth, and the administration of justice always tempered with mercy. They are from hereditary pedagogical custom rigid, firm and exacting in discipline, but that does not mean that there is any lack of love on the part of the teacher, or that the pupils do not love their teachers. Indeed, the children are generally fond of their teacher, and hold him in highest respect. Kindness is the rule and harshness the rare exception. No doubt there are still abuses of this kind, and so there are in American schools, but the idea that the German schoolmaster is a tyrant to pupils is surely a mistaken one." Seeley, *Common School System*, pp. 85-86.

in Saxony throughout most of the nineteenth century. No wonder Maeser's Utah students were both awed by the breadth of his training and taxed by the rigor of his discipline!

Maeser's years at the *Kreuzschule* did, however, have one unusual feature that left a lifelong impression upon him. Its principal, Hermann Koechly, an aggressive, dynamic scholar-pedagogue, had already become known as an outspoken critic of the excessive emphasis on Latin and rote learning, especially of Latin works, in the *Gymnasium*. Koechly argued vigorously that it was "both a crude and widely spread erroneous idea that the ability to speak and write Latin was the same as a classical education."²³ He therefore formulated his own program which limited the study of Latin, renewed the emphasis on Greek, and increased the reading time spent in modern languages and the natural sciences in place of writing and speaking exercises.

Koechly's reforms found only modest acceptance as philologists and reactionaries rose up in unison to denounce them as precursors of the academic ruining of Germany as well as the subversion of both church and state.²⁴

The earlier traditional curriculum was, however, an accurate reflection of the dominant influences upon education and the general intellectual climate in Germany in general during the 1830s and '40s. The traditional central role of religion, deriving from Reformation and Pietist times had been rationalized to a shadow of its former self. Religious training was to continue in the schools, not because its doctrines were true, but because it provided a pragmatic moral guide for youth until they reached maturity and were motivated by higher philosophical principles. In the years following the Napoleonic Age, the ideological power of the German Enlightenment and its extension in the classical humanism and idealism so magnificently articulated in the works of Goethe, Schiller, Winckelmann, Herder, and Humboldt, had raised man, especially the well-rounded Greek ideal of man, to the level of god.²⁵ If man from his primeval state of goodness had, by ignorance and benighted institutions been corrupted, it was the task of the arts and

23. Paulsen, *Geschichte*, 2:474-75.

24. *Ibid.*

25. As Johann Gottfried von Herder observed: "With solemn reverence we ascend to Olympus, and there behold the forms of gods in the likeness of men. The Greeks deified Humanity. Other nations debased the thought of God and made it monstrous; but this one elevated the divine in man to deity." As quoted in William S. Learned, *The Oberlehrer: A Study of the Social and Professional*

education to rescue him from ignorance and degradation. Man should be able to experience the freedom and full flowering of his own personality. Hence, the creation of a society and a system of education which would release this individual genius and establish the dignity of every human being was the primary duty of those living in an enlightened age. Nor was this freedom only for an elite few. In 1792 Humboldt articulated the importance of freedom for every person in his *Ideas to Attempt to Determine the Limits of State Authority*:

Let no one believe, furthermore, that freedom of thought and enlightenment are for the few in any nation; that the many are so exhausted by activities dictated by the need for earning a living, that freedom of thought is useless to them, or even disturbing. Or that they can best be activated by the diffusion of principles handed down from on high, while their freedom to think and investigate is restricted. There is something utterly degrading to humanity in the very thought that some human being's right to be human should be abrogated. No one stands at such a low level of culture that he is incapable of reaching a higher one. Even if the most advanced and enlightened religious and philosophical ideas could not reach a large part of the citizenry directly, even if it proved to be necessary to clothe the truth in such a way that it could find a point of contact, even if one were forced, in other words, to speak more to their hearts and their imaginations than to their cold reason, nonetheless the widening of horizons of scientific knowledge which is the result of freedom of thought reaches them as well, and the beneficent consequences of free unrestricted inquiry stretch over the spirit and character of a whole nation, down to its last and least knowing individual.²⁶

Evolution of the German Schoolmaster (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 33.

William Learned summarized this view of the nineteenth century *Gymnasium's* pedagogical thrust: "Add to the faith in this trinity [the Good, the True and the Beautiful] the further conviction that the Good, the True and the Beautiful are supremely useful and that all together serve the purpose of a noble patriotism, and you have the dominant motives of the new-humanist *Oberlehrer*." *Ibid.*, p. 52.

26. Humboldt, "Ideen zum einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen," in Cowan, *Humanist*, p. 33. In commenting on the message of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, Robert Anchor notes: "For the chief question Goethe raises here, the one around which *all* the characters in the novel revolve, is what a person must be, what qualities and insights he must possess, to enable him to relate to a dehumanizing society without either

On the importance of the individual and his development through education Humboldt wrote:

All reflection upon ultimate or distant aims invariably leads us back to the investigation of our present condition. For since such aims may be found in the highest, most definite, most harmonious development of all human capacities, they always lead back from the general to the individual, from the future to what is needful right now. Any attempt to promote the progress of the human race which does not emanate from the organic development of its individuals is barren and chimerical; if on the other hand, the individual's education is attended to, its influence upon the totality follows of itself, and without specific intention."²⁷

That Maeser knew his Goethe, Schiller, and Humboldt well and had absorbed many of their fundamental ideas is evident both from the prominence of their works in the *Gymnasium* curriculum, by references to them in Maeser's written work, and especially by his later espousal of similar ideas.²⁸ For example, in *School and Fireside*, under the heading of "True Education," he wrote:

Every human being is a world in miniature. It has its own centre of observation, its own way of forming concepts and of arriving at conclusions, its own degree of sensibility, its own life's work to do, and its own destiny to reach. All these features may be encompassed by general conditions, governed by general laws, and subject to unforeseen influences and incidents, but within the sphere of their own activity, they constitute that great principle which we call individuality.

Individuality means not the mere part of existence, as in plant-life, nor the mere power of conscious volition as in the animal. In man it means that inheritance that separates man from the rest of the physical creation, empowers him with endless progression, and designates him as an offspring of Deity.

being destroyed by it or compromising with it. . . . This combination of hero and poet is what Goethe understood by genius, which, for him, was nothing more than the normal man fully developed." Robert Anchor, *Germany Confronts Modernization: German Culture and Society, 1790-1890* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1972), p. 30.

27. Humboldt, "Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert," in Cowan, *Humanist*, p. 143.

28. Maeser's *School and Fireside* contains numerous aphorisms and couplets from Goethe's and Schiller's writings. See pp. 24, 29-30, 62, 319, 334.

This divine attribute of man is placed for the time being at the disposal of the educator, whether in the family circle or at school, to cultivate and develop it to its utmost capacities.²⁹

The German *Gymnasia* were, like the universities and much of Europe's intellectual community, also at the same time under the spell of German Idealism, the legacy from Immanuel Kant through G. F. W. Hegel, who by the 1830s had for a full generation dominated philosophic thought which postulated not only the primacy of mind—both absolute and individual—in the quest for truth, but exerted a powerful influence against both established religion on the one hand, and philosophic materialism on the other. Lionel Trilling's description of Hegel's philosophy as a new kind of "secular spirituality" captures the confidence of the orthodox Hegelian movement in the individual intelligence's ability to grasp the totality of reality without resort to orthodox Christian doctrines.³⁰ Maeser's later rejection of evolution—especially that theory of evolution deriving from Herbert Spencer—as the "process underlying all phenomena in the physical and mental world" had its roots not only in his understanding of Mormon doctrine, but also in Idealism's rejection of its philosophic assumptions:

According to the theory of some evolutionists, all faculties of the mind are only operations of physical forces, which view reduces psychology to a mere branch of physiology. The utter helplessness of the new-born infant and the very gradual awakening of its perceptive faculties seem to sustain, at first glance, such a proposition. But closer analysis leads to the conclusion that the five senses are mere means for the conveyance of impressions. Behind the physical mechanism is a receptive, conscious and directing mind that is endeavoring to familiarize itself with the use of the organs of sense and motion, as an apprentice begins to handle tools and instruments placed before him. Mind is not the product of matter, but inhabits, premeates, [sic] and vivifies matter. On entering the body, it brings along capacities that raise the new-born

29. *Ibid.*, p. 243. Maeser's own articulation of education even uses much of the same language as his intellectual mentors: "The highest aim of education lies in the endeavor to cultivate the head heart and hand, in the knowledge of and the voluntary obedience to the laws of the True, the Good and the Beautiful, for therein consists the heaven-inherited right of free agency. Sin, ignorance and coarseness are moral and intellectual defects and exclude the complete exercise of free agency (p. 116).

30. Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom, eds., *Victorian Prose and Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 9. Cf. *School and Fireside*, pp. 31–32.

infant, notwithstanding its apparent helplessness, far above any of the most advanced animal species.

How did that mind come into possession of capacities entitling it to such possibilities? Did these capacities originate with the mind itself during the embryonic period? If so, the mind with its wonderful capacities would be the result of the physical process of conception, and would have to terminate with the exhaustion of the forces that started them both into activity.

That is the theory of evolution. There is, however, a grander view of the case pointed out to us by the voice of Revelation.

The mind or spirit entered into this mortal sphere from a previous state of existence known to the Latter-day Saints as our “primeval childhood.” Our condition in this world is as much the natural consequence of the course pursued in our previous existence, as the life hereafter will be the natural consequence of the course pursued during mortality. This great principle of pre-existence contains the keynote to the doctrine of pre-destination or rather pre-ordination. God never acts arbitrarily as some sectarians would have us believe, but the shaping of every man’s destiny is largely by his free agency in his own hands. . . .³¹

It should be noted in passing that the philosophical step from Hegel’s Absolute Mind or Spirit using free men to accomplish its purpose to the Mormon view of God’s direction of the world’s destiny without violating man’s agency is not a prohibitive one.

Sometime during the course of his nine year *Gymnasium* experience, Maeser apparently made his decision to eschew a university career in order to train for a career as an elementary teacher. With this in mind he enrolled at the Friedrichstadt Teacher School in Dresden where the emphasis was much less upon scholarship and much more upon pedagogy. Teacher preparation schools had little prestige in Germany in the 1840s, being considered decidedly inferior to the vaunted universities.³² But Maeser had made a decision to which he tenaciously adhered throughout his life—to become a great teacher.³³

31. Maeser, *School and Fireside*, p. 109.

32. Paulsen, *Geschichte*, 2:277. It was taken as axiomatic that if you were a good scholar, good teaching would take care of itself.

33. Maeser’s aphorism: “If it shall please my Heavenly Father, I will be a teacher in Heaven” was an expression of his early decision in an enlarged Mormon context. see Karl G. Maeser, “Sentence sermons of Dr. Karl G. Maeser,” Maeser File, BYU Archives.

Here he came under the indirect spell of the already-famous Swiss pedagogical reformer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), whom Maeser called “the apostle of the present day educational dispensation,”³⁴ and his German disciples, Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the kindergarten, and Jean Herbart. Even a brief comparison of Pestalozzi’s principles—including his pedagogical epigrams, and Maeser’s own approach to education reflects the debt Maeser owed and paid to his mentor.³⁵ What Maeser wrote about Pestalozzi, his own students would later write about him:

In seeking the reason for the prominence accorded this humble and unpretentious teacher, we select only a few items from his long career of usefulness. He discovered the mainspring of all successful instruction, viz. object-lesson teaching. By discarding textbooks, with their theoretical principles and abstract rules, and basing his instructions upon objects within reach of his pupils, he brought his school into communion with the realities of life. In his celebrated work, “Leonhard and Gertrude,” he demonstrated the inseparable connection between scholastic and domestic education. By his loving and fatherly ways, he won the affection of his pupils, and by the purity of gentleness of his life, he raised up before them the authority of a worthy example.

Like Socrates, Pestalozzi had many followers, that developed his ideas into various systems, which are today forming their part in the further development of theoretical and practical education.³⁶

Maeser probably entered the Friedrichstadt Teacher College in 1846 on the basis of a scholarship provided annually by the Meissen nobility to two students from their area.³⁷ There were fifty students whose daily routine began with getting up at 5:00 A.M., Bible reading at 5:30 after singing (students were required to bring a hymnbook, choral book, and Bible), then breakfast followed by instruction beginning at 6:00 A.M. in summer and seven in winter. This particular teachers’ college also had a school for poor children connected to it where students could practice teach, a feature undoubtedly attractive to the budding pedagogue.

34. Maeser, *School and Fireside*, pp. 26–27.

35. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, *The Education of Man: Aphorisms*, ed. William H. Kirkpatrick (New York Greenwood, 1975), passim.

36. Maeser, *School and Fireside*, pp. 26–27.

37. Christian Traugott Otto, *Die Schule und des Schullehrerseminar zu Friedrichstadt-Dresden von 1785–1835* 2. Auflage (Dresden: Arnoldschen Buchhandlung, 1836), p. 60.

By the spring of 1848, Karl had completed the requirements for graduation which included

. . . a specific and correct knowledge of the main truths of Christianity, familiarity with the biblical history, a general knowledge of geography, competence in general mathematics, familiarity with the main rules of spelling and grammar of the German language, fluency in the ability to articulate ideas, an understanding of the principles of logic and psychology, competence in playing piano and some experience in singing.³⁸

In addition, the future elementary school teachers were “to organize religious truths into an orderly whole” to relate them to everyday life, to avoid the appearance of affected erudition, and to apply in all subjects the general principles of pedagogy. Following Pestalozzi, students were admonished to use the practical experiences of the school to implement the teaching they had learned. Finally, students were required in the second and third years (the additional year was for those who had not graduated from a *Gymnasium*) to teach one hour per day, prepare two original German language and two musical compositions per month, to learn and preach sermons and to play the organ. They were also required to sing in the choir and perform in concerts.³⁹

But this was not the end of the preparation. Each student was also required to complete an apprenticeship of two years as a teacher’s assistant or as a private tutor. Maeser chose the latter course and went in the spring of 1848 to the village of Goerkau, then part of the Austrian Empire just across the border in present-day Czechoslovakia to tutor Lutheran children living in this Catholic area. Though he may have returned for visits from time to time during the two years, he was not directly in Dresden during those tumultuous months of 1848 and 1849 when much of Europe, Germany, and Saxony (especially Leipzig), erupted in revolution. Nevertheless, Maeser’s sympathies, as already noted, were firmly committed to the Liberal-Constitutional party, the party of most Saxon intellectuals, led by Professor Karl Biedermann in Leipzig. Their program called for an extension of the liberties provided in the 1831 Constitution, for the development of a responsible, parliamentary check upon the powers of the monarchy, and for the unification of all German states into a united Germany under a liberal constitution.⁴⁰ This position reflected

38. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Franz Blanckmeister, *Saechsische Kirchengeschichte* (Dresden: Verlag von Franz Sturur, 1899), p. 398.

both Maeser's enthusiastic liberal and national sentiment and put him squarely in the camp of those seeking a moderate and realistic solution to the promotion of his cherished ideal, the enlarged freedom of the individual. He seems even then to have realized that the "freedom to think," the keystone of the German classical humanist tradition, was inadequate for real human freedom and creativity, a lesson which most Germans would not fully learn for nearly a century.

Unfortunately, by 1849 all signs of revolutionary political achievement had faded not only in Saxony but in Germany as a whole. Reaction and repression set in under the iron fist of the ultraconservative Count Beust. Thousands of Saxons emigrated in the early fifties, draining the land of some of its best brains and most highly skilled artisans.⁴¹ Maeser returned to Dresden to begin his career as a teacher and, perhaps, to prepare himself for marriage and a family. Not having attended a university nor being yet twenty-four and thus old enough to pass the Second Teachers' Examination, Maeser was only qualified to teach provisionally in the elementary grades. It is probable that he returned to Meissen as a substitute teacher for a year or two and then seeing his opportunity, responded to an advertisement in the *Dresdner Anzeiger*, 25 March 1852, soliciting substitute teachers for two of Dresden's *Buergerschulen*.⁴² Here, Maeser met the principal, Carl Immanuel Mieth, who hired him. The *Adressbuch* for Dresden records him as a teacher in Mieth's school in the first district during the years 1852 and 1853.⁴³ During the second year, 1853, Eduard Schoenfeld, later to be his brother-in-law and fellow Mormon, joined the faculty, and also joined Maeser in frequent visits to the Mieth home where the young teachers shared an interest in the principal's two daughters. By 1854 Maeser had moved to a new private school on the outskirts of Dresden, the Budich Institute. Undoubtedly, Maeser was drawn to the institute not only by the opportunity to become an *Oberlehrer* (assistant master teacher), but also because it provided a more conducive setting for the implementation of his innovative pedagogical principles. The school was originally a four-year preparatory one for those unable to do well in regular public schools, but was soon

41. Hildegard Rosenthal, *Die Auswanderung, aus Sachsen im 19 Jahrhundert (1815-1871)* (Stuttgart: Ausland und Heimat Verlag, 1931), p. 28. During the following years, 1853-1861, 4,531 Saxons emigrated to North America, 3,260 to other German states and 1,283 to other countries.

42. *Dresdner Anzeiger und Tageblatt*, 25 March 1852

43. *Adressbuch der Stadt Dresden, Staatsarchiv Dresden*, Bd. AA.

extended to a kind of special continuing education school for students, especially girls, up to age sixteen. Apparently, Professor Budich had had some difficulty in communicating the purpose of his school to the community. In the 29 March 1852 edition of the *Dresdner Anzeiger und Tageblatt*, he countered the rumor then circulating that his school was only for young children, pointing out that both boys and girls over twelve years of age were enrolled. Then, to answer apparent accusations about the academic respectability of his institution, he noted that, in addition to instruction in French and English, the upper classes also taught Latin and Greek, the traditional touchstones of true education.⁴⁴

It was while preparing his lectures for the religion classes at the institute that Maeser confronted directly the spiritual crisis which had been building in him. In this he shared a predicament with most of the European intellectuals of his age. This was not only the age of Hegel and Marx, but of Kierkegaard and Carlyle, of Matthew Arnold and Tennyson, all of whom, caught in the intellectual and spiritual maelstrom swirling around the centers of enlightenment and science, were gradually losing their faith in religion and religious systems and were struggling to see purpose in life and the universe. As Lionel Trilling has trenchantly observed "The dark night of nihilism was a common event in the lives of thoughtful men of the 19th Century."⁴⁵

Maeser was particularly put off by the traditional petty quarrels between Protestants and Catholics in Saxony.⁴⁶ Neither partisans seemed to understand that their quibbling was only a surface diversion; the battle in the trenches, already taking recognizable shape, was a battle between Christianity and its means of human salvation and the newer secular philosophies which were later augmented by fully articulated Darwinism and Marxism, and the obvious materialist cultural values springing up with industrialization. These were not only successful in wooing away the intellectuals, but served as a kind of justification

44. *Dresdner Anzeiger*, . . . 29 March 1852.

45. Trilling, *Victorian Prose*, p. 9.

46. Blanckmeister has drawn a fascinating picture of how the two major sects quarreled over superficial matters while Saxons were perishing in unbelief. Cf. *Saechsische Kirchengeschichte*, p. 368ff. A scathing critique of organized Christianity in Germany by the influential young German author, Karl Gutzkow, calls religion an "attitude of despair about the purposive nature of the world" (*Verzweiflung am Weltzweck*). See Karl Gutzkow, "Gestaendnisse ueber Religion und Christentum," in *Das Junge Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam, 1966), p. 207.

for the growing religious indifference of the common people throughout Europe.

Maeser has left two brief glimpses into his own spiritual struggle and the agnostic condition he found himself in when his attention was first drawn to an account describing the evidences of spiritual and religious vitality of the maligned American sect, the Mormons. In an article, "How I Became a 'Mormon,'" published later in life in the *Improvement Era* he wrote:

As *Oberlehrer* at the Budich Institute, Neustadt, I, like most of my fellow-teachers in Germany, had become imbued with the scepticism that characterizes to a large extent the tendency of modern higher education, but I was realizing at the same time the unsatisfactory condition of a mind that has nothing to rely on but the ever changing proposition of speculative philosophy.

Although filled with admiration of the indomitable courage, sincere devotion, and indefatigable energy of the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, I could not fail to see that his work had been merely an initiatory one, and that the various protestant sects, taking their initiative from the revolutionary stand of the heroic monk at Wittenberg and Worms, had entirely failed to comprehend the mission of the reformation. The only strength of Protestantism seemed to be its negative position to the Catholic Church; while in most of the positive doctrines of the multifarious protestant sects their antagonism to one another culminated only too often in uncompromising zealotry. These ideas illustrate in the main my views on religious subjects, at that time and are explanatory of the fact that scepticism had undermined the religious impressions of my childhood days, and why infidelity, now known by its modern name as agnosticism, was exercising its disintegrating influence upon me.

In that dark period of my life, when I was searching for a foothold among the political, social, philosophical and religious opinions of the world, my attention was called to a pamphlet on the "Mormons," written by a man named Busch. The author wrote in a spirit of opposition to that strange people, but his very illogical deductions and sarcastic invectives aroused my curiosity, and an irresistible desire to know more about the subject of the author's animadversion caused me to make persistent inquiries concerning it.⁴⁷

47. Karl G. Maeser, "How I Became a 'Mormon.'" *Improvement Era* 3 (November 1899): 23–26.

In his memorial address given in Meissen in 1926, Maeser's former student, James E. Talmage, remembered:

Even as I have heard the story from his lips direct, I tell it to you. He had undertaken to prepare a lecture or thesis on the distinctive characteristics of the many and varied churches of the day. By a fortuitous coincidence, during the time of his research he came across a newspaper story relating to the Latter-day Saints, depicting them in a very unfavorable light, even mis-representing them by such epitaphs as fanatical un-Christian-like, dishonest and immoral generally, but the writer of this article, which was intended to be calumnious and derogatory told also of the wonderful growth and development of these strange people in the valley of the Rocky Mountains, of the growing commonwealth they had planted in the desert, of their achievements in agriculture and industrial areas. With the analytical vision of a trained reasoner and moreover with the open and unbiased mind of an honest man, a lover of truth, Karl G. Maeser saw the inconsistency of these contradictory assertions. "I knew," he has said to me many times, "that no people could develop and thrive as the facts showed the Latter-day Saints to have done and at the same time be of a degraded nature and base ideals."⁴⁸

The story of Maeser's investigation of Mormonism and conversion to the Church in 1855 is well-known. The spiritual manifestation which followed the ordinance, the speaking in tongues with Elder Franklin D. Richards, provided a supernatural benediction to Maeser's quest to know of God and his will which nourished him, his family, and his students for several generations. As Eduard Schoenfeld observed, from that time Karl G. Maeser was a changed man.

As by magic he was at once transformed, changed, illumined, yes inspired. The skeptic of yesterday was at once the ardent advocate of real religion, not because he had found some new passage in the Bible, but because his soul had been touched, the way was clear, he knew it for himself. . . . He now . . . had hold of the right Key. God had silently placed it in his hands, and all was clear to him. . . .⁴⁹

Maeser had thus acquired the spiritual foundation for a whole philosophy of life and education. The reality of God and the validity of his word not only gave him the overwhelming sense of purpose in life

48. Talmage, "In Honor of Dr. Karl G. Maeser."

49. Schoenfeld, "Dr. Karl G. Maeser."

he had been seeking in his own soul, but provided a foundation from which the objectives of the German idealist philosophers and pedagogues could be achieved. He only needed time for the fuller development of his educational philosophy, and an opportunity to implement it. That opportunity would not, Maeser knew, come in Saxony. The repressive regime of Count Beust following the Revolution of 1848–49 suppressed innovation in every phase of life. Neither political nor religious freedom, both of which Maeser craved, existed. Neither did his chances for employment as a teacher, now that he had joined the Mormon sect. But in any case, the climate for teachers committed to educational reform along Pestalozzian principles was, at best, dismal. Adding to these reasons the inward call to build up Zion, he decided to take his family, fellow members, and friends, and join the throng who were leaving Saxony for a new beginning in America. From then on the United States of America became his spiritual home and the building of the Kingdom his consuming mission.

The loss of men and women like Karl G. Maeser for Germany and German education would not be felt directly until well into the next century. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, German secondary and higher education developed a world-renowned reputation for seminars, scholarship, and sophisticated culture. In philology, history, philosophy, theology, law, economics, and in the rapidly-developing sciences, German universities drew admiring students and professors from all over the world. One trained at a German university had sat at the feet of the accepted masters and bathed himself in the glow of erudition and fame.

But beneath the glittering exterior, all was not well. The objectives of Humboldt, Goethe, and the early educational reformers had been thwarted; instead of a broad education for ever-extending generations of German youth, specialization had chosen a few for lifetimes of pedantry and technical competence while forgetting the broad development of the mind and the training for political and social responsibility. German education, and with it German society, was in trouble. One prominent historian, Hajo Holborn, looking back on some possible explanations for the German catastrophe of the twentieth century, concluded:

. . . It would be one-sided to look at the rise and the subsequent support of the Nazi party exclusively in terms of social conflict. The actual decline of German education goes far to explain not only why so many Germans voted the Nazis into power but also why they were willing to condone so many of their subsequent crimes. German education hardly

dealt with the “whole man; it chiefly produced men proficient in special skills or special knowledge but lacking not only in the most primitive preparations for civic responsibility but also in a canon of absolute ethical commitments. Although the churches provided this for a good many people, and to a greater extent within the Roman Catholic Church than within the Protestant churches, the number of Germans who looked to the Church for guidance was limited. The higher philosophy and the humanities of the period were largely formalistic or relativistic and did not produce a firm faith. In these circumstances it was inevitable that so many people fell for cheap and simple interpretations of life and history, as offered by the racists. To young people in particular this proved an irresistible temptation.⁵⁰

During its recent centennial celebration the community of scholars at BYU was reminded anew of its unique educational opportunities, privileges, and responsibilities to contemporary society. President Spencer W. Kimball has reaffirmed with emphasis the prophetic challenges given here in 1968 and President John Howard of Rockford College, speaking at the 1976 April Commencement, challenged us all to conquer a wilderness “disguised as civilization” which is “subtle and fluid and elusive.”⁵¹ This challenge is, however, not just for BYU, nor just for America, but for the world. We could do worse than to take Dr. Maeser’s philosophy of life and education back to Europe and to the rest of the world as an alternative to the confusion, purposelessness, and appeal of the hollow Marxist humanism which now prevails as an outgrowth of the secularization of Western education and society during the past two centuries.

Maeser’s principles are as relevant today as they were in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Like him, we still need to make a better attempt to be “whole men” before we teach our students about wholeness. Education is still of a piece, combining the secular with the spiritual, the “school with the fireside.” Teachers need to have an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to the dignity of all men as children of God, whether rich or poor, black or white, gifted or dull, and to their callings to help develop the slumbering potential in those children. Like Maeser we must be humble before God and learn “even

50. Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1969), p. 813.

51. John A. Howard, “. . . Outraged by Silence,” *Speeches at the 101st Annual Commencement*, Brigham Young University, 23 April 1976.

by faith” but also be bold and courageous in addressing ourselves to our colleagues and to the world. We must be willing to work as hard and devotedly as he did to become both scholars in our disciplines as well as informed citizens of the world community and fellow citizens with the Saints in the household of faith. When this takes place then, just as Maeser’s vision of an outward university on Temple Hill has seen its fulfillment in our day, so will the spiritual and intellectual soul which should permeate those buildings become a living reality.

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