

A. LeGrand Richards. *Called to Teach:
The Legacy of Karl G. Maeser.*

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Reviewed by Heather M. Seferovich

Powerful and inspiring teachers can profoundly impact their students, both in this life and in the eternities. Many of us are fortunate to look back fondly on one or two influential teachers who played a critical role in shaping our personalities or careers. Anyone who is a teacher, whether in a formal or informal classroom, or anyone who has had an inspiring teacher will enjoy the educational biography of Karl G. Maeser, written by another teacher, A. LeGrand “Buddy” Richards, a professor of educational leadership in the McKay School of Education at Brigham Young University.

Richards was the ideal person to write this book. His great-great-grandfather is Franklin D. Richards, the European Mission president who baptized Maeser; these two families have been intertwined for generations. As a career educator who has also been a visiting professor at the University of Würzburg, Germany, Richards undoubtedly found insights that some classically trained historians might have missed. He wrote, “In many ways, without intentionally setting out to do so, my career has been steered so that I could be prepared to write this book” (vii). While Maeser is a significant figure who has been acknowledged primarily in articles, passing references, and footnotes—but generally overlooked by in-depth studies—he was first and foremost an educator, and this is appropriately reflected in *Called to Teach*.

Writing this biography of Maeser was a labor of love for Richards, who spent about a decade finding everything he could on Maeser; much of this thorough, painstaking research has resulted in new information, especially about the years prior to Maeser’s baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As good as the chapters are overall, I think the quality of information about Maeser’s life before baptism is well worth the price of the book.

Richards's tenacity in completing this mammoth project is also noteworthy. In the course of writing this magnum opus, he endured a massive heart attack, an accident resulting in a traumatic brain injury, a major hard drive crash and failed automatic backup that wiped out a year's worth of work, and other misfortunes before completing the project.¹ Many readers like myself will be forever grateful that Richards overcame all these obstacles and produced such a stellar work in spite of them. Similarly, the publisher did excellent work in editing and designing the book.

Instead of focusing on misfortunes he faced during writing, Richards talks freely about the many tender mercies he experienced. For example, on a trip to Washington, D.C., he had only one day to take the train to Philadelphia to look for a record of Karl Gustav Franklin Maeser, the infant son who died as the family's ship reached Philadelphia in 1857. (For decades many family members thought little Karl had been buried at sea.) Once there, Richards discovered the main city archives were closed, so he looked elsewhere. He happened to walk by the Historical Society of Philadelphia and decided to go in. Richards recalled, "Within 15 minutes, I found a reference to the death of Karl Maier,² who died on July 4, 1857, and was buried in the Macpelah Cemetery." The record also named the attending physician "and listed the cause of death as debility (a term used most often to refer to infants who do not have the ability to thrive)." Richards recounted other tender mercies, such as finding a letter from Julia Tyler, wife of U.S. President John Tyler, referencing Maeser's piano lessons to their children, and finding letters about Maeser's work with the Saxon Teachers' Association.³

The first two chapters of *Called to Teach* explore Maeser's educational history and explain the historical setting in which he was living during this time. I found it interesting that Maeser had both a traditional and a progressive education and worked as a private tutor during a time of social and political unrest in Saxony. Tensions in his local and professional communities ran high before and after the failed revolutions in various German states. Restrictions about what could be taught were

1. Personal conversation with A. LeGrand "Buddy" Richards, January 16, 2014.

2. The first name and date are correct, as is the fact that he was an infant; the misspelling of the last name is likely a result of the heavy German accent not being properly understood by the American recorder. Richards discovered that the original cemetery where little Karl was buried was moved in 1890.

3. A. LeGrand Richards to Heather M. Seferovich, email, July 21, 2014.

oppressive, as were the rules surrounding the amount of time spent on religious education. As a master teacher at the Budich Institute in Dresden, Maeser “had come to believe that education should open the doors to democratic participation, but the beloved homeland to which he had returned was dramatically suppressing public liberty and restricting the autonomy of teachers” (56).

Of particular interest to me was the explanation of Pestalozzian philosophy and politics, which laid the foundation for the way Maeser implemented Brigham Young’s guidelines—“don’t teach the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit.” As a result, throughout his life Maeser interwove intellectual and spiritual development with character and lifelong learning and service. Influenced by the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi thought that an education would be the answer to the problems that plagued the poor in his native Switzerland. Pestalozzi believed “that each person has unlimited potential,” and he disliked the stern teaching methods of the day. He advised teachers to begin with concrete principles and then move to abstract ones. “Pestalozzian thought also required teachers to never do for students what they could learn to do for themselves” (23). This revolutionary educator wanted to reach his students on many levels, so he believed “that a whole education required the proper development of the head (rational power), the hand (physical capacities), and the heart (moral dispositions)” (23–24). These were important theoretical building blocks for Maeser, and we still see them very clearly in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Church Educational System. Unfortunately, many of these same principles “were considered dangerous to the social order” (57) in Maeser’s day and forbidden from being used by teachers in Saxony.

These conditions created a hostile environment for Maeser on nearly every level: politically, educationally, culturally, and spiritually. “Under the oppressive policies of the [Lutheran] church and state, he had become disillusioned with religion” (80). This is about the time he came across an anti-Mormon pamphlet on the Church written by Moritz Busch. Maeser read it but did not believe the author’s poorly constructed arguments. Instead, the publication inspired him to write a letter to the missionaries requesting more information.

As soon as missionaries devised a way to enter the country in September 1854, Maeser, his wife, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law were discretely taught the gospel by Franklin L. Richards and William Budge. After just a month of tutelage, Maeser and his relatives had a surreptitious

evening baptism outside the city limits. “Later Maeser wrote that as he came out of the water he promised the Lord that if he would be given a testimony that what he had just done was pleasing to the Lord, he would do whatever the Lord would require of him” (106). It seems that Heavenly Father took Karl up on that promise.

In Maeser’s case, the missionaries had to leave the country, so they called him to be the branch president in Dresden. His new religious affiliation ended up costing him his job and life in Germany. Although he artfully fulfilled his duties, the political and religious climate was so oppressive that eventually his activities were discovered by government officials. The fact that authorities wrote “handed over to Liverpool” on the back of his birth certificate implies that his departure in July 1856 was involuntary (125). It is certain that when Karl G. Maeser joined the Church, he did not foresee his future role as the father of the Church Educational System and the impact he would have on generations of Latter-day Saints. In Richards’s words, Maeser “sacrificed almost everything for his new convictions: all the comforts he had earned, the support of most of his family, his beloved homeland, and his respect in the world. . . . He was forced to learn a new language and to find employment far beneath his potential and training” (202). Yet the Lord was able to make so much more out of Maeser than he could have made on his own.

In Liverpool in 1856, Maeser was called as a missionary to the German-speaking population—a sizeable group since many had been fleeing Germany for nearly a decade because of the political climate. The Saints in England helped support Maeser and his family until they emigrated to the United States in May 1857. Since the family lacked funds for further travel and Johnston’s Army was approaching Utah that year, Maeser stayed in the East to find employment. Ultimately, however, Maeser served another mission to the German-speaking population in Philadelphia and Virginia before embarking on the westward journey in 1860.

In the Salt Lake Valley, Maeser resumed his teaching career. “Before Christmas [1860] he would organize, advertise, and begin a new school; help found the first Territorial Teachers’ Association; serve as the first president of the German Language Home Mission and attend its weekly meetings; and become a member of the board of regents for the University of Deseret” (203). After teaching at different schools in the city, his reputation grew. From 1865 to 1867, Brigham Young hired him to teach dozens of his children.

During these early years in the valley, Maeser refined his educational philosophies and honed his teaching skills with a wide variety of students with different abilities. “He learned about the challenges of building Zion and the spiritual challenges that come during temporally depressed circumstances” (215). Probably most important, he had time “to bond the educational theories of Pestalozzi with the theological doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (215–16).

Between 1867 and 1870, Maeser served a mission to Europe, where he was stationed in Switzerland and eventually became the mission president and publisher of the Church newspaper *Der Stern*. Once in Switzerland, he was able to cross the border into Germany to visit with his father and other relatives, who received him kindly but had no interest in the Church; they instead sought to bribe him and his family to return to Germany.

Upon his release and return to Salt Lake City, Maeser discovered that several of his former colleagues were involved in the Godbeite movement,⁴ and one in particular, James Cobb, was even courting his sister-in-law. “Maeser had known or worked closely with nearly all of the leading figures in the movement through church assignments, the Territorial Teachers’ Association, and the University of Deseret” (311). Although these colleagues tried to recruit Maeser to join them, Maeser, “the man partially converted to Mormonism by Moritz Busch’s anti-Mormon text, was quick to see through the Godbeites’ rhetoric” (301).

For a few years Maeser resumed his busy teaching schedule, teaching youth as well as adults. He even taught a few courses at the University of Deseret in Latin, Greek, and German. In 1876, Brigham Young called Maeser to become the principal of Brigham Young Academy. The last half of the biography focuses on Maeser’s tenure as principal. Not only does Richards tell the history, but he also explores Maeser’s teaching philosophies.

Maeser grounded the academy “on two prophetic injunctions: Joseph’s directive to teach correct principles and let students govern themselves, and Brigham’s counsel to teach all subjects with the spirit of God” (390–91). As a master teacher, Maeser could identify students’ divine potential and then inspire them to work hard and succeed in their endeavors. Love was also a crucial component in his success. Many

4. See Ronald W. Walker, *Wayward Saints: The Social and Religious Protests of the Godbeites against Brigham Young* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009).

stories from his students testify of Maeser's effective teaching methods. As "an uncompromising suffragist" (393), he believed "that both men and women should prepare themselves to become instruments in the hands of the Lord for whatever he would call them to do" (394).

Maeser, like Brigham Young, believed that all knowledge came from God and therefore was spiritual in nature. Maeser saw no conflict in intermingling education and religion. He "insisted that 'the fundamental characteristic of the work in the Church schools was that the Spirit of God permeates all the work done'" (377). And that "a method of teaching based upon and penetrated by the Spirit of the Gospel, even if not expressed in words, is superior to any other, no matter what scientific, artistic and mechanical advantages they may claim to possess" (476).

Maeser's pithy statements abound throughout the book, but they are especially prominent in the last half. For example, "It takes a stout heart to serve the Lord, but the opposite course is much easier: 'It will take you to destruction on velvet cushions'" (396). Or "One good question is often as good as ten answers" (413). Or "There are two periods in a man's labors when circumstances seem to dictate to him the advisability of making as few words as possible, they are at the beginning and at the end of his work" (492). Or "He who makes of his mind a mere storehouse of facts is not a scientist; he is only a cyclopedia" (515). Thankfully, Richards is putting together a Maeser quote book, so these quotes and many others will be easily accessible soon.

Chapter 17 explores the era when Maeser retired from the academy (to begin supervising all Church schools) and Benjamin Cluff took over. Richards masterfully compares and contrasts the two men. He accurately surmises that while both had much in common in terms of general educational and spiritual philosophies, there was a tension in the finer points of execution, and the

tension has continued [to our day]. How much should a Church school conform to the academic standards of the larger society? What is the proper balance between resisting the influences of the world and seeking to impress it? What is the proper relationship between academic expertise and priesthood authority? If Church leaders are seen as spiritual stewards over the school, what does it mean to speak of academic freedom? How should disagreements in policies or academic theories be resolved at a Church school? . . . What is the proper course of action when a faculty member loses faith in the sponsoring Church? (560)

Many of these questions are still relevant in our day, and I have watched faculty and administrators grapple with several of them over the last

quarter century. Richards does not answer these prickly questions; he only explores the differences in execution between Maeser and Cluff and carefully notes how Maeser had gained his education and then came into the Church, while Cluff had been raised in the Church and then went outside the religion to gain his education.

Maeser's legacy continues to be felt well into the twenty-first century. At this point, his educational philosophies have influenced literally millions of students. That is why Richards's new biography of Maeser is so important and will likely stand as *the* work on him for many years to come.

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