Grown in German Soil

Fritz Schumacher was born on August 16th, 1911 in the German city of Bonn. He had been preceded by twins – a boy and a girl – who were just over a year old when he was born, but as he was a healthy, strapping baby he soon caught up with his more delicate brother and sister so that the three of them came to be known by all their acquaintances as the triplets.

Fritz was named after his father’s brother; the twins after their parents, Hermann and Edith. The name Hermann carried with it the burden of generations of eldest sons. Since the fourteenth century they had served their country loyally, performing civic duties in the Hanseatic town of Bremen, where the first recorded Hermann Schumacher was elected mayor. Subsequent generations of Schumachers bore the office and in 1604 Bremen publicly acknowledged their service by adding the Schumacher coat of arms to those of other notable families in the town hall.

The traditional ties with Bremen town hall were broken by Fritz’s grandfather. He wanted to play a wider role in the world and went abroad with his wife, two small sons and a baby daughter, first to be German Ambassador in Bogota, Colombia, and then to be German Consul in New York, where two more daughters were born. Their life in the wilds of the Andes and amongst the skyscrapers of New York was not always conventional. The two boys were more or less left to educate themselves. After a brief and unhappy period of formal schooling in a New York establishment their father was con-
vinced that they would learn more left to their own devices; they were given a printing press and the young ‘Schumacher Brothers: Printers’ set themselves up in business. They learnt mathematics by keeping their accounts and literacy through typesetting, their father insisting only that they carried on their printing business with proper professionalism and dedication.

In 1882 Ambassador Schumacher was posted to Lima and the two boys were sent home to Bremen for a more formal education. They felt like orphans away from their parents and sisters. Bremen seemed to be full of critical aunts of all shapes and sizes who peered at ‘the two German shoots grown on American soil’ through curtained windows as they walked down the street on their way to school. Hermann, the elder, found it particularly difficult to settle down and recorded many years later in his memoirs that this episode in Bremen strengthened the north German tendency in my personality, but also tied me to my brother in an unusually close bond. From then on we lived – almost as orphans – in the house of my mother’s older sister … However friendly our reception was, it could never take the place of our parental home. As Fontane says, home ‘exerts its influence from minute to minute in those formative years of the soul’, where example is more important than teaching. That feeling of natural belonging which one takes for granted could only develop slowly and with more difficulty for the older (brother) than for the younger.¹

The absence of continuous family bonds, exacerbated by the early death of his father, all helped to make Hermann single-mindedly wrapped up in his own life: dogmatic, authoritarian and dedicated to the pursuit of his career, breaking only to holiday with his brother whenever their busy lives allowed. His career progressed well. He studied first law and then economics. By the age of thirty-one, in 1899, he had already gained the distinction of being appointed to a chair of economics, at Kiel University, without having acquired the usual obligatory academic qualification of a doctorate. Once he was a professor, the world opened out, particularly after he had founded a
school of economics in Cologne in 1900, the first to have university status in Germany. As Hermann’s reputation spread to the upper echelons of society he was appointed tutor to the Crown Prince and his brothers. He travelled widely to the Far East and China, collecting economic data, and twice to New York, where on his second visit in 1906 he was the first ‘Kaiser Wilhelm Exchange Professor’ at Columbia University, returning after a year to the chair of economics at Bonn University.

Professor Schumacher was a dedicated teacher and a gifted one. He took enormous trouble, not only with the material he presented to his pupils, but also in his interest in their progress. The ‘Schumacher students’ regarded themselves as a privileged group and formed a society, the ‘Schumacher Verein’ in which they honoured their teacher even after his death.

The Professor combined a personal interest in his students with a firm belief in his own authority as their teacher. Just as it would not occur to him to question the authority of a legally elected government, even if he disagreed with its policies, so he did not expect his pupils to question his position. His pupils accepted this, for it was an attitude commonly held amongst the Professor’s contemporaries, and one which later was to result in tragedy for Germany. But it was less easy for his children to tolerate. Their father’s interest in them often took the form of unsolicited and dogmatic advice, and his authoritarianism, lacking the compensating qualities of sensitivity but rather made worse by touchiness, oppressed them, particularly in the way it affected their mother.

Professor Schumacher was over forty when he married, while his wife was barely older than some of his students. His approach to marriage was essentially practical. Finding there was less pressure on him in Bonn, he decided it was time to renounce his bachelor existence and find a suitable wife. A highly respected colleague and professor of law, Professor Ernst Zitelmann, had three striking daughters. Professor Schumacher first noticed them while on holiday with his brother Fritz at the North Sea. He decided that any one of the girls would suit him but was at a loss how to proceed with the selection. He wrote in his memoirs:

The meeting on the North Sea beach was a short but im-
pressive prelude. Returning to Bonn the situation was simplified. Although the father guarded his daughters like a personal treasure, the middle and most energetic had the courage to get engaged and in fact, to marry, and the eldest went to Paris and Brussels to complete her artistic studies. So only the youngest was left. The elimination, which I could hardly have managed by myself, was decided upon by a sympathetic fate.

Edith was eighteen years younger than her future husband, but her beauty seems to have struck the Professor less than her shyness and modesty. He was amazed to discover, some time after their marriage, that she was also a talented mathematician who had managed to solve a problem that had been puzzling mathematics professors for some years.

Professor Schumacher courted Edith at archaeology lectures which she attended with her mother. Not surprisingly, given his inexperience and her shyness, it was hard going. Even his proposal was unromantic in the extreme. On his way to her house he stopped to buy flowers for the occasion: the flowers he grabbed absentmindedly were artificial.

Such insensitivities were wounds that Edith Zitelmann received on many occasions after her marriage, but her husband was generally oblivious to her sufferings. One washing day soon after the birth of their twins the Crown Prince called unexpectedly. He wanted the Professor to accompany him on a visit to the Far East. After some minutes of conversation the Professor invited the Prince to step into the garden. It did not occur to him that it would humiliate his wife to walk the Prince past the flapping lines of laundry.

Shortly after this incident the Professor departed for China, Japan and Indonesia leaving his wife with the twins and expecting a third child. The trip turned out to be a disaster. The Crown Prince abandoned it before the Professor had reached their rendezvous in Singapore. Professor Schumacher nevertheless pressed on alone, only to catch malaria so severely that the doctors attending him on his return marvelled that he had survived the journey.

With her husband to nurse and twins of just one year old to look after, Edith Schumacher gave birth to their third child.
He was christened Ernst Friedrich, Ernst after his grandfather, Ernst Zitelmann, and Friedrich after his uncle and godfather, Fritz. It was a happy choice, for the uncle and his nephew had more in common than just their names. They had a mutual respect and affection and they were to share a similar sense of humour and a liking for writing apt and pithy verse. Uncle Fritz was an authority on Goethe and a distinguished and influential professor of architecture and town planning, eventually to redesign and rebuild a considerable part of Hamburg and Cologne. He was somewhat less dogmatic and authoritarian than his older brother, possibly because his two sisters lived with him and kept him in order. These two spinsters were not favourites of their nephew Fritz. His childhood memories were of two formidable ladies whose affections were concentrated entirely on a little dog with digestive disorders which filled the house with an intolerable stench that seemed to escape their notice.

Fritz’s first playmates were naturally his brother and sister, Hermann and Edith. Fritz was more extrovert than Hermann and his charm and intelligence succeeded in stealing the limelight from his older brother on many occasions, particularly when family friends and relations provided an audience. Edith was more like Fritz than her twin in this respect and the two of them formed a close bond. She was Fritz’s companion and confidante and though she argued with him constantly and challenged everything he said, she believed early on that he possessed an extra dimension of perception. Later, when they were both adults, she saw him after a long separation and said to herself, ‘He is like another Beethoven.’

Edith was artistic and imaginative. She was also determined to prove that such insights were not flights of fancy. She genuinely believed that her brother Fritz had superior abilities and understanding. There is an old nursery rhyme called ‘Hänschen klein’. The words, roughly translated, go: ‘Little Hans goes out into the world with nothing but his hat and stick for company. But mother weeps bitterly now that she has no more little Hans and the small child, realizing this, returns home quickly.’ Edith, although she was already six, had not consciously heard the second part of this rhyme until she heard Fritz singing it to himself. She concluded that with his com-
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passionate wisdom he had put himself into the shoes of little Hans's mother and made up a verse on her behalf. Edith's faith in Fritz was so strong that she refused to accept his assertion that the verse had existed long before he had.

Life in the Schumacher household was disciplined and regular, dictated by the Professor's needs. These were silence when he worked in his study and modesty and thrift in his wife's housekeeping. But outside events soon imposed a certain irregularity. In 1914 Europe was plunged into catastrophe. The children were probably more affected by the birth of another sister, Elisabeth, that year, than the outbreak of war but they would certainly have noticed the changes that suddenly took place around them. The colours of everyday life were transformed into a monotonous grey. The Professor wrote:

The outbreak of the war made itself visible with almost uncanny speed in the appearance of the street. Its brightness suffered a sharp decline. As with one stroke all motor vehicles were painted grey and all the many colours that the uniforms had had up to now were displaced by the standard field grey. Life had taken on a more serious and monotonous appearance.

As young people went into the army, the number of the Professor's students dwindled, reducing his income. He began to write for local newspapers and give outside lectures. Soon the Prussian Minister for Trade, Von Sydow, summoned him to Berlin to discuss wartime economics and particularly the problem of war profits. Then the problem of food supplies became pressing. There was an element of black humour in Professor Schumacher's involvement in these discussions. The Germans, with their reputation for enjoying a good sausage, were faced with the dilemma that a vast population of pigs was competing with the population of humans for limited supplies of cereals. It was a question of bread today or sausages tomorrow. Professor Schumacher advised bread today and the resulting slaughter of pigs went down in history as the Schweinemord - the pig murder. It caused a controversy which rumbled on beyond the end of the war.
In 1917, just as Fritz was reaching school age, Professor Schumacher was appointed professor of economics at Berlin University and the family moved to the capital city. The Professor was delighted with the move. It meant more to him than just academic promotion. In Bonn the family had lived in the Zitelmann’s old house. In Berlin, for the first time, he bought a house of his own. He wrote in his memoirs: ‘Here a feeling of home could develop. The ownership of the house, even more than the new professorship, made me believe that I had reached the goal of my life.’

The new house was to be the family home until the early 1940s. It was a large and typical nineteenth-century German house with a high gabled roof and carved veranda. A conservatory led into the garden, well stocked with fruit bushes and shrubs – lavender, lilacs, roses and rhododendrons. Around it were other similar houses and gardens. Steglitz was a respectable, middle-class suburb of Berlin where many professional families had settled. Arno-Holtz Strasse, where the Schumachers bought their house, was half way up the Fichteberg, the highest point of the area from which one could look down over the whole of Berlin, and also led directly into a botanical garden where the Professor took a daily walk.

The Schumachers’ move to Berlin coincided with the beginning of hard times in Germany. By 1917 food was getting scarce. It was no longer enough to live frugally; extra measures had to be taken to live respectably. The Schumachers tried unsuccessfully to grow vegetables and then turned the garden over to livestock. Chickens, rabbits and goats became part of family life and gave the children some of their happier memories during those difficult years. The goats, which at one time numbered ten, gave them the most pleasure. They were housed in the cellar but the kids were allowed into the drawing-room where the poor creatures tried to take their first shaky steps on the slippery parquet floor. Even the Professor was amused by the entertainment.

As food shortages bit harder it became more difficult to feed the goats. The children would go out daily, foraging for scraps in their neighbours’ dustbins. They became a familiar sight running about on the Fichteberg in bare feet (for shoes had become a luxury) with their buckets in their hands. But the
goats got thinner, their milk supply dried up and they were relegated to the stew pot. The children seem to have been very unsentimental about this, remembering only their interest in seeing the inside of the goats as they were cut up before going into the cooking pot.

It was not a time to be sentimental. In the last months of the war and in the years after the fighting had ended the children felt real hunger. It made a deep impression on Fritz. He never forgot the feeling of emptiness, the feeling of exhaustion which lack of food produced, and later recalled vividly how he would have to rest on his way up the Fichteberg when he carried his violin back from a music lesson. For a while the family felt real deprivation, so much so that when the Red Cross selected undernourished children to recover in their camps from the rigours of the war, the Schumacher children were amongst those chosen.

If hunger was a formative experience for Fritz, so was the bitterness felt by many patriotic Germans at their humiliation by the Treaty of Versailles, leaving them without any hope in their future. Professor Schumacher expressed the opinions of many when he wrote in his memoirs:

That Germany was robbed of her ability to negotiate politically by having to hand over her warships, by being forbidden an airforce, by having to pull down her defences and by the utmost reduction of her strength at sea was understandable. But that Germany was weakened as no other country before by having important lands in the east and west of the country taken away, as well as all colonies, that the remaining territory was torn apart by the Polish Corridor, that the most important part of her merchant navy was taken, that her foreign investments were liquidated and initial refusal given to most economic plans, as well as being burdened with war indemnity under the name of ‘reparations’ that would have exceeded even her unweakened economy, was hard to understand. All reconstruction that a modern four-year war demands was made impossible. Constant new unrest was unavoidable.

The immediate effect of post-war unrest on the Schumacher
household was that ten young soldiers, part of the force sent to restore order in Berlin, were billeted on them. It marked the beginning of a new flow of visitors. To supplement his income the Professor decided that the family must take in paying guests. The first was a high-born Indian who was related to the writer Rabindranath Tagore. His contribution to family life was a passion for home-made wireless sets, and for classical music which he brought to the house on the still imperfect new medium of gramophone records. He was followed by countless others, most of them from England or the English colonies.

Apart from paying guests the family was also often supplemented by one or other of the Professor’s students. As young soldiers returned to civilian life, the Professor noticed a different, more serious approach amongst the swelling ranks of his students. The more promising were brought home and made part of the family, among them the Hungarian economist Thomas Balogh (later Lord Balogh and adviser to the Labour government under Harold Wilson). Balogh recalled that such friendliness was very unusual among the professors in Berlin.

Professor Schumacher was not involved solely with his teaching. As the economy collapsed he was again called to discuss the problems with the government ministers in Berlin. As inflation reached the crisis levels of 1923 the secret talks grew more and more desperate. Many eminent economists were involved, including John Maynard Keynes and the Governor of the Bank of England, but the problems appeared insoluble. By the beginning of November 1923 the Minister of Finance, Hans Luther, believed that ‘a dissolution of the social order was expected almost from hour to hour’.  

November 1923 in fact marked the turning point and the end of the economic chaos, and most authorities attribute the control of the inflation crisis to Hans Luther and the Reich’s currency commissar, Dr Hjalmar Schacht, who later became Hitler’s ‘economic miracle worker’. Professor Schumacher has a slightly different story to tell.

At the end of October or beginning of November 1923 the newly appointed Finance Minister, Luther, called together another meeting at which five or six men were present, myself
included. It was soon obvious that the convenor of the meeting had not had the opportunity to acquaint himself thoroughly with the monetary problems. This was the first stroke of luck at this meeting; it was not necessary to overcome preconceived ideas. The second was that soon after the meeting began Luther was called away to a long telephone conversation. We therefore had the unusual opportunity of discussing the matter amongst ourselves. We discovered that we were all in agreement: the never-ending demands made on the Reichsbank by the treasury, with which it had been essential to comply because of the war, had to stop now that the wartime necessity had ended. With that the spiralling prices would stop. Then the value of paper money had to be put back to a sensible level. The Reich’s finance minister was for a moment taken aback, then he recapitulated what had been said in a few words and declared decisively: ‘That will be done gentlemen. Thank you.’

On November 23rd, 1923 the German currency was stabilized, one billion old marks were replaced by one new Reichsmark and the inflation had been overcome.

Fritz, only a schoolboy when these important meetings were taking place, could not escape the reality of the problems under discussion. Inflation was a terrifying everyday experience in which the children were also involved. They were sent out to join the queues for food, their shopping bags bulging with paper money which took up more space than the few essentials which they hoped to buy. They were always afraid that prices would have been put up before their turn had come. Then they would have to return to their mother empty-handed. She too had been thrown into a panic when her fifth child, Ernst, was born in 1922. She heard that the fees in the nursing home had been put up to 3,000 million marks a day and would have discharged herself had not her husband managed to convince her that his salary had kept pace with these staggering figures.

While these disturbing experiences taught Fritz modesty in material matters, his experience of school fostered in him an intellectual immodesty. He and his brother Hermann both attended the Arndt Gymnasium, a large and imposing school with high academic standards and well born pupils, not far
from their home. It was fortunate that he and Hermann, although in the same year, had different interests and were therefore in different parts of the school. Hermann's leanings were towards the sciences whereas Fritz preferred the humanities. Fritz generally assumed that he knew better than Hermann in most fields of knowledge so their separation enabled Hermann to prosper quietly without being constantly undermined by his precocious younger brother.

Fritz's sense of intellectual superiority grew with each term although it was by no means always justified by his results. His interests were wider than the school curriculum and his ability to ask searching questions tested his masters to their utmost. Aware of this and bored by the lack of challenges, Fritz directed much of his sharp wit into making fun of those teachers for whom he had the least respect, in particular the German literature teacher, Herr Alphonse Marx. Marx in return gave Fritz as low marks as he dared. When Fritz matriculated in the spring of 1929 he dealt the final blow to Marx's self respect by publishing a cutting poem in the school magazine. It began:

When he stands at the desk and teaches us verse,
The meaning distorted so that we all curse,
He glances at one piece then turns to the next
So the students all shout because they are vexed . . .

Mathematics lessons bored Fritz most of all because he worked so quickly that he was rarely allowed to participate, the master dismissing him with: 'Not you, Schumacher, I know you know the answer.' The master knew too that most of the class copied their homework from Fritz. He set different work for each boy but Fritz still managed to get round all those who needed help. Fritz was rather proud of the way he finally hit back at the maths master. His eyes still lit up with glee as he related his triumph to his children many years later. He began to take books into class. The master soon bellowed: 'Schumacher! What are you doing?' 'Reading' came the reply. 'Bring me the book.' The next lesson the same thing happened. Another book was confiscated. Again and again the exchange was repeated until Fritz wore down the master by bringing so many books in at a time that the entire lesson would have been taken
up with confiscating Fritz’s books if the master had not relented and allowed Fritz to read.

These antics which infuriated his masters amused most of his classmates, who liked Fritz for his sense of fun and respected his intelligence. A few who had been the targets of his stinging wit liked him less: class or status did not protect them. Fritz named one boy, a German aristocrat, ‘der Punkt’ – the dot – following Euclid’s definition of ‘something with position but no substance’.

Frustrated in lessons, Fritz put more effort into non-academic activities. He was an enthusiastic member of the drama society as an actor and a playwright. On his seventeenth birthday he completed a long play about the struggle for German unity in the twelfth century. It was called Heinrich der Löwe and was successfully performed and well reviewed in local newspapers. The play still exists.

Eight months later, in the spring of 1929, he matriculated, glad to have finished with school. But he felt that something was eluding him. As an adult he expressed these early frustrations in A Guide for the Perplexed: ‘All through school and university I had been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and that seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance to the conduct of my life.’

As a youth, he did not yet know what really was important to him but by the time he was sixteen he had come to regard the holidays as the only time in which he could try to delve deeper. He worked with such discipline that his mother began to fear for his health. She begged him to take a rest in his work, without success. ‘As there are so few moments during term time that I can give to this world of books and ideas,’ he explained, ‘and as all sorts of desires to achieve something out of this world occur to me during this time, I often need part of the holidays to follow them just a little. And if I don’t have this time I cannot find real peace and happiness in myself.’

Two years later, on April 5th, 1929, he wrote again of this feeling of restlessness, the lack of fulfilment he had first experienced at school. This time it was to his sister Edith:

That you are so completely happy despite the amount of
work — or rather, no, no doubt because of it — is an enviable condition. Not because of the work but altogether. Unfortunately I can never quite manage it. I have a strange and restless longing in me that cannot be fulfilled. Perhaps hopefully in the future but not yet. — Well, never mind. I am content and happy now when I find a tolerable level of inner harmony.