



Discoverer of LSD celebrates 100th birthday

Hofmann's pioneer work an accident

'I had wonderful visions,' says chemist

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GENEVA—LSD is an unlikely subject for a 100th birthday party. Yet the Swiss chemist who discovered the mind-altering drug and was its first human guinea pig is celebrating his centenary today — in good health and with plans to attend an international seminar on the hallucinogenic.

"I had wonderful visions," Albert Hofmann said, recalling his first accidental consumption of the drug. "I sat down at home on the divan and started to dream. What I was thinking appeared in colours and in pictures. It lasted for a couple of hours and then it disappeared."

Hofmann, who also had bad experiences with the drug, continues to insist it should be legalized for medical treatment, particularly in psychiatric research. But LSD's reputation has been as turbulent as some acid trips.

The drug earned a bad reputation amid fatalities associated with hallucinations and reports of "flashbacks" — the recurrence of hallucinations when not taking the drug.

LSD inspired the 1960s hippy generation and was immortalized in the Beatles' hit "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," although the band denied any connection. But it was also known as Like Swift Dead.

Stories emerged of people going on murder sprees or leaping from windows while hallucinating. Heavy users suffered permanent psychological damage.

For decades after LSD was banned in the late 1960s, Hofmann defended his invention.

"I produced the substance as a medicine," he said. "It's not my fault if people abused it."

The chemist — who still takes nearly daily walks in the picturesque village where he lives in the Jura mountains with his wife of 70 years, Anita — discovered lysergic acid diethylamide-25 in 1938 while studying the medicinal uses of a fungus found on wheat and other grains at the Sandoz pharmaceuticals firm, now part of Novartis.

Hofmann was the first person to test the drug when a tiny amount seeped on to his finger during a repeat of the laboratory experiment in April 1943.

"Everything I saw was distorted, as in a warped mirror," he wrote of the experience, noting his surprise that LSD was able to produce "such a far-reaching, powerful, inebriated condition without leaving a hangover."

The chemist experimented with a larger dose days later, but the result was a "horror" trip. "I was filled with an overwhelming fear that I would go crazy. I was transported to a different world, a different time," he wrote.

Hofmann had hoped LSD, which exaggerated inner problems, might be used to recognize and treat mental illnesses like schizophrenia.

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