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Father of LSD, now 100, and his 'problem child'

By Craig S. Smith *The New York Times*

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BURG, Switzerland Albert Hofmann, the father of LSD, walked slowly across the small corner office of his modernist home on a grassy Alpine hilltop here, hoping to show a visitor the vista that sweeps before him on clear days.

But outside there was only a white blanket of fog hanging just beyond the crest of the hill. He picked up a photograph of the view on his desk instead, left there perhaps to convince visitors of what really lies beyond the window.

Hofmann turns 100 on Wednesday, a milestone to be marked by a symposium in nearby Basel on the chemical compound that he discovered and that famously altered consciousnesses around the world. As the years accumulate and his time left on the planet grows short, Hofmann's conversation turns ever more insistently around one theme: man's oneness with nature and the dangers of an increasing inattention to that fact.

"It's very, very dangerous to lose contact with living nature," he said.

"In the big cities, there are people who have never seen living nature, all things are products of humans," he said. "The bigger the town, the less they see and understand nature."

And, yes, LSD, which he calls his "problem child," could help reconnect people to the universe.

Rounding a century, Hofmann is physically reduced but mentally clear. He is prone to digressions, but his bright eyes flash with the recollection of a mystical experience he had on a forest path more than 90 years ago in the hills above Baden, Switzerland. The experience left him longing for a similar glimpse of what he calls "a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality," but it also left him deeply connected to nature and helped shape his future.

He became particularly fascinated by the plant kingdom, by the mechanisms through which plants turn sunlight into the building blocks for our own bodies.

"Everything comes from the sun via the plant kingdom," he said.

He says that any natural scientist who is not a mystic is not a real natural scientist.

Hofmann went on to study chemistry and took a job with Sandoz, a Swiss pharmaceutical firm, because the company had started a program to identify and synthesize the active compounds of medically important plants. He soon began work on the poisonous ergot fungus that grows in grains of rye.

Midwives had used the deadly material for centuries to precipitate childbirths, but chemists had never succeeded in isolating the chemical that produced the pharmacological effect. Finally, chemists in the United States identified the active component as lysergic acid, and Hofmann began combining other molecules with the unstable chemical in search of pharmacologically



useful compounds.

Hofmann's work produced several important drugs, including a compound to prevent hemorrhaging after childbirth. But it was the 25th compound that he synthesized, lysergic acid diethylamide, that was to have the greatest impact, although it yielded no significant pharmacological results.

When his other work on ergot was completed, he decided to go back to LSD-25, hoping that improved pharmacological tests could detect the stimulating effect on the body's circulatory system that he had expected from the compound.

It was as he was synthesizing the drug on a Friday afternoon in April 1943, he recalled, that he first experienced the altered state of consciousness for which it became famous. He rode his bicycle home, lay down and spent hours mesmerized by hallucinations.

"Immediately, I recognized it as the same experience I had had as a child," he said.

When he returned to his lab the next Monday, he tried to identify the source of his strange experience, believing first that it had come from the fumes of a chloroform-like solvent he had been using. Inhaling the fumes produced no effect, though, and he realized he must have somehow ingested a trace of LSD.

He first experimented with the drug, taking a dose so small that even the most active toxin known at that time would have little or no effect. The result was a powerful LSD experience, during which he again rode his bicycle home, this time accompanied by an assistant.

He later participated in clinical tests in a Sandoz laboratory, but found the experience frightening and realized that the drug should be used only under carefully controlled circumstances.

Later, he wrote to the German novelist Ernst Jünger, who had experimented with mescaline, and proposed that the two take the new compound together. In 1951, together with a medical doctor, the two men each took 0.05 milligrams of pure LSD at Hofmann's home, accompanied by a vase of roses, music by Mozart and a stick of Japanese incense.

"That was the first planned psychedelic test," Hofmann said.

He took the drug dozens of times after that, he said, and once experienced a bad trip, what he calls a "horror trip," when he was tired and Jünger gave him amphetamines first to freshen him up.

He calls LSD "medicine for the soul" and is frustrated by the worldwide prohibition that has pushed it underground. "It was used very successfully for 10 years in psychoanalysis," he said.

But the drug was hijacked by the youth movement of the 1960s and then unfairly demonized by the establishment that the movement opposed, Hofmann said. He conceded that LSD could be dangerous and called its indiscriminate distribution by Timothy Leary and others "a crime."

"You should only give it to people with a certain stability who can survive a bad trip," he said. "It should be a controlled substance with the same status as morphine."

Hofmann is a philosopher but no high priest. He did not quit his job after his LSD experiences but worked to retirement and lives now with his wife in the house they built 38 years ago. He raised four children and watched one son struggle with alcoholism before dying at the age of 53. He has eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

As far as he knows, no one in his family other than his wife has tried LSD.

When asked if the drug had deepened his understanding of death, he appeared mildly startled and said no.

"I go back to where I came from, to where I was before I was born, that's all," he said.

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