

OSCAR GEIGER—DREAMER AND REALIST

THE HENRY George School of Social Science is Oscar Geiger's dream come true.

Like so many of his contemporaries whose lives and thoughts were enriched by reading "Progress and Poverty," this practical idealist was eager to extend the influence of the book; but he alone had the sagacity to see that through classroom education could it be done most effectively. Thus through one man's vision, many had the vision, and a great adventure in education was begun.

The dream that launched the School in New York in 1932 was not new to Oscar Geiger. Over thirty-six years before, he had thought of such a school. It was in the middle Nineties that young Geiger, in quest of the answer to human suffering, first read "Progress and Poverty." He read it through in a single night, from dark to dawn. Soon he sought out Henry George who was then, in 1897, making the stand for mayor of New York that was to end his life. On one occasion, when a disputed point in political economy arose in a group including Henry George, the youthful Oscar Geiger ventured an explanation. Mr. George turned delightedly to one of the men and said, "Here is the economist of our movement." Not long after, the young "economist" was teaching his first class—it was called the Progress club—which grew to 155 members, all working men.

Later, in 1914, Mr. Geiger outlined a plan for reading circles, foreshadowing the present School program. "There is no enduring short cut to freedom," he insisted. "Fundamental social betterment, to be lasting, must come in response to a demand from the people, and the people must understand before they can demand."

"Equipped with Knowledge, Tact, and Tenderness"

Whoever came under the spell of Oscar Geiger's enthusiasm, his learning, his considerateness, gained new insight. His powers as an orator were surpassed only by his qualities as a teacher. "He is equipped with knowledge, tact, and tenderness," wrote one observer. "His students love him and that is half the battle. But he asks nothing of them save the exercise of their reason." His teaching made the School what one of his early graduates defined it:

A school where devotion to an idea prevails; where sincerity pervades the atmosphere, and facts are faced; a place where selfishness is ruled out; where faith revives and reason reigns.

Perhaps Mr. Geiger's early training to be a rabbi supplemented his own natural aptitude for imparting truth to others. Possibly his long years in business gave him an understanding of human nature such as few pedagogues have ever had. Whatever the origin of the force responsible for his accomplishment, certain it is that without great teaching from the beginning, the School would never have survived the first crucial years.

In 1932, in the midst of depression and insecurity, Mr. Geiger confided to his old friend, Joseph Dana Miller: "I

mean to devote what is left to me of life to found a school that will be so firmly established that it will be assured of continuing when I am gone." Mr. Miller, editor of the bi-monthly magazine, **Land and Freedom**, told him he was "crazy." Mr. Miller referred to the hard times; said that nobody had any money, and that those who had it once had now lost it.

But eighteen months later, Mr. Miller was to tell a Henry George convention in Chicago: "Our words had no effect. The more we argued, the more sure he seemed to be of the rightness of his purpose and the certainty of its success, because, he argued, this is exactly the time when the school is needed most.

"I Know that Doors Will Open"

"Where and from whom do you expect to get the money for such an ambitious scheme?" I asked him. "I don't know," he replied, "but I do know that there is intent and purpose in Nature, that what we mean to do is in harmony and accord with such intent and purpose, and that as long as we do our part unselfishly, intelligently, and persistently, the forces behind creation will do theirs. I know that doors will open; that the way will be shown and that help will come, even if I don't know from where."

A Modern Damon And Pythias

Against such faith Mr. Miller was without defense. He offered to do his part. And an important part it was. A modern Damon and Pythias these two men! Mr. Miller, twelve years Mr. Geiger's senior, watched over each step that the School was to take. Each issue of **Land and Freedom** carried

reports of the School's progress, the editor pleading in advance for the help that the School's founder had faith would come.

But there were anxious moments. Now fifty-nine, Mr. Geiger cast be-

hind him all hope of preferment in other fields. On the eve of assuming the work of the School he received an offer from an established firm with assurance of a competence and part ownership of the business. He rejected it. Instead he put the meager residue of his life's savings into his belief that—

"If we mean to share in the task of making this world a better place to live in, and the human race really a brotherhood, it is for us to supply the vision, the leadership, and above all, the teaching that is lacking today."

Mrs. Geiger Took Up Typing to Help

Mrs. Geiger, equally inspired with the prospects of the School, learned typing to help carry the mounting secretarial burden and to save expense. Mr. Geiger paid for the early meeting places, for printing and mailing notices, and for college paper advertisements.

A year and a half after the School was started, Editor Miller had to confess that he had seen "the doors open and the way being shown" by the faith of his friend: "Today the School is a state-chartered institution; has its own headquarters; its own classrooms; its own library and reading room; space for office work; large handsome signs on building and doors, and all this in one of the best and most accessible locations in New York."

The following spring of 1934, however, the very progress of the School had placed such burden on Mr. Geiger and his slender resources that Mr. Miller was forced to plead in **Land and Freedom** to "Save the School!"

Before the larger support came that made possible a nationwide expansion of the School, Oscar Geiger was dead.

Dies at His Home—

The Home of the School

"It will be sad news to hundreds of his friends to learn of the death of Oscar H. Geiger on June 29 of a sudden heart attack," wrote his colleague, Joseph Dana Miller in *Land and Freedom*. "He died at his home which was also the home of the School, to the greater success of which he was looking with that hopeful vision that was part of his nature."

Students declared to the last among them: "The School must go on!" And it did. The faith of Oscar Geiger was vindicated.

He Had Seen and Made Others See

In last tribute to his friend, Mr. Miller wrote:

"Not all of his dream has been realized but he had passed the threshold. Something of the inner beauty of that palace of light and truth, the glorious structure of a new civilization for a freer race of men and women, he had seen and made others see. Perhaps that was achievement enough for any man."