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ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER

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On January 3, 1934, Henry Harap of Western Reserve University wrote to his friend Paul Hanna of Teachers College asking him to persuade Jesse Newlon (also of Teachers College) to convene a meeting of liberal colleagues in education during the annual conference of the Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association, scheduled to be held in Cleveland in February of that year. Appalled by the frightful conditions of the Great Depression, Harap recognized that while educational liberals were deeply concerned with the national emergency and the significance of the public schools in helping to rebuild the nation, they had not explicated any clear ideas as to the actual role that the schools should serve in that effort. From this modest beginning, the seed was sown for what was to become the John Dewey Society for the Study of Education and Culture.

At the age of forty-one, Henry Harap was then Associate Professor of Education at Western Reserve University in Cleveland where he was gaining national recognition as a leader in the emerging field of curriculum development. Harap had immigrated to the United States from Austria

in 1900 at age seven with his parents. It was a time when the immigration from Europe was reaching its peak. "No such great movement of peoples was ever known before in history," wrote Ellwood P. Cubberley (1947, p. 482). Harap was a product of the New York City Public Schools, and had gone on to earn his bachelor's degree at the City College of New York, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Teachers College, Columbia. He taught briefly in public and private schools in New York City. Following his tenure at Western Reserve, he joined the faculty at Ohio State for the 1936–1937 academic year, and then went on to George Peabody College until his retirement in 1959.

Paul Hanna was born in Iowa in 1902, earned his bachelor's degree at Hamline, and his M.A. and Ph.D. at Teachers College. He had served as superintendent of schools in West Winfield, New York, from 1925 through 1927. At the time he received Henry Harap's letter, Hanna was Assistant Professor at Teachers College and a research associate of Jesse Newlon at the Lincoln School. He joined the faculty in education at Stanford University in 1935 where he became the Lee J. Jacks Professor in 1954. Following his retirement from Stanford, Hanna served as a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace until his death in 1988. A leading figure in the field of social studies curriculum and international education, Hanna chaired the editorial board of the *Building America* series of monthly paperback texts from 1935 to 1948. The texts were widely used in social studies classes in the junior and senior high schools, reaching a circulation of over a million copies an issue. The *Building America* series had originated as a project of the Society for Curriculum Study when Henry Harap was serving as chair of the Society's Executive Committee. *Building America* was

conceived to enable youngsters to examine the nation's pervasive social problems critically and constructively. However, during the early years of the Cold War, the series became a victim of attack by the conservative press, the ultraright, and the California Joint Legislative Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities. The last issue appeared at the end of 1948 when school boards were having the texts destroyed.

Jesse Newlon served on the Editorial Board of *Building America* from 1936 through 1942. He had been brought to Teachers College in 1927 to direct the Lincoln School following a career of creative curriculum leadership as Superintendent of Schools in Denver. In Denver, Newlon had supported the work of teachers in curriculum development with released time, funding, and consultation. The *Denver Research Monograph Series* contained the results of these efforts and the issues of this publication were in demand by school systems throughout the United States and abroad. Born in Indiana in 1882, Newlon earned his bachelor's degree at Indiana University in 1907. He went on to serve as a teacher and principal in the schools of Indiana and Illinois, and as principal and later Superintendent of Schools in Lincoln Nebraska before going on to Denver. He earned his master's at Teachers College in 1914 and an LL.D. at the University of Denver in 1922. Newlon became director of the program in educational foundations at Teachers College in 1938.

Looking back to the conditions of the Great Depression when Henry Harap wrote to Paul Hanna, Harap recalled that "It was a time of a terrific awakening of the schools to their educational responsibilities" (1970, p. 157). Harap's comment can in no way be taken to mean that the Great Depression was a propitious event for educators and the

schools. The “tremendous reawakening” was marked by great disputation among educators of that day and great opposition by business interests to progressive educational reform. As Harap recalled, “We were in the midst of a frightful depression. Many people thought that we were on the brink of an economic disaster” (p. 157). In his letter to Jesse Newlon on April 27, 1934, Harap wrote, “The movement to the right has definitely crystallized. The newly invigorated, dominant economic groups are more defiant than they have been in five years.”

No chronicle of the perverse social and economic conditions of that period in our history can possibly convey the despair and suffering which were so rampant. In looking back on any historic period, there is the popular cliché, “Those were simpler times.” However, life was not so simple under conditions of unprecedented economic and social dislocation. Unemployment had reached epidemic proportions.

The New Deal reforms of relief, child welfare, social security, unemployment insurance, federal work projects for the unemployed, rural electrification, minimum wages, agricultural reconstruction, and so on, were yet to be put into concerted action. The storm clouds of Nazism and Fascism were hovering over Europe. Amenities that are taken for granted today were unavailable—from refrigeration in the home to antibiotics in medicine. Extensive areas of rural America were still without electricity. Under the menacing conditions of the Great Depression, many knowledgeable people believed that the American economy could not possibly survive.

It was under these conditions that Henry Harap was impelled to write his letter to Paul Hanna. The response was prompt and affirmative. In an exchange of correspondence,

Harap and Newlon compiled a list of potential participants for the meeting of liberal-minded educators in early February of 1934. Letters were sent to forty-two educators inviting them to attend a luncheon meeting at the Hollenden Hotel in Cleveland on Sunday, February 25, 1934. Only five replied that they would be unable to attend.