

# Kurt Hahn:

the German-Jewish refugee  
who educated kings and had a  
profound impact on  
educational values and  
practice in Britain and across  
the world.



Jan Levi

janlevi007@gmail.com

# Kurt Hahn 1886 - 1974

His vision and energy were decisive in founding

- Salem School 1920
- Gordonstoun 1933
- Outward Bound 1941
- D of E Award Scheme 1956
- Trevelyan Scholarships 1958
- Medical Commission for Accident Prevention 1964
- Atlantic College 1962

Prince of Wales as United World College President Elect



## Early Life

- Born into a prosperous Jewish family in Berlin
- 2<sup>nd</sup> son of Oscar Hahn and Charlotte (née Landau); brothers Walter, Franz and Rudolph.
- Highly cultured home, strong anglophiles.
- Little evidence of religious observation or synagogue attendance.

Father Oscar with brothers Franz (L) and Kurt



- Mother, Charlotte (Lotte)  
Cultured, kind, intellectual,  
talented pianist, adored by  
Kurt.
- Descendant of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Chief Rabbi of Prague
- Summers were spent at the  
summer home at Wannsee  
Lake.
- Kurt led a reading circle.
- Happy, high-spirited childhood.





# Education

- Attended formal, disciplined Kaiser Wilhelm Gymnasium
- Described it as a 'torment box' and 'burial ground.'
- Gave him a life-long antagonism of education based on academic activity alone.
- Later, aged 24, he wrote a book called *Frau Else's Promise*, which contained a severe criticism of contemporary schools and education.



# The future calls.

- In 1902, aged 16, Hahn met a group of pupils from the progressive school Abbotsholme in Derbyshire, while walking in the Dolomites.
- The students gave him a book by Hermann Lietz called 'Emlohstobba' as a present.
- This was his 'call of destiny.'



3<sup>rd</sup> July 1904

Hahn plays  
the Prince in  
a family play,  
aged 18.



## The illness that changed his life: July 1904

- A few days later he rowed across the Havel river on the hottest day for 100 years and fell asleep on the bank. This caused life-threatening sunstroke.
- Depression set in. His life was now a wash-out, a failure before it had really begun.
- No one knew what was wrong with him. He would need several surgeries to relieve pressure on the brain.
- For the rest of his life, he had to stay out of daylight
- This period cast the mould of his personality. He had to spend a lot of time alone.
- Healing, and triumph over adversity, became important themes in his life.

## Oxford: Christ Church College

- Hahn enrolled at Oxford – he did numerous courses between 1904 and 1912 but sat no exams. He also attended Gottingen, Berlin, Freiburg and Heidelberg Universities.
- He took part in the Anglo-German and Debating Societies.
- He made a lot of contacts and spent time in Scotland.
- In 1907 he lost his father Oscar, who was 49.





## From Peace to War ...

- When war broke out in August 1914, he left Scotland for Germany and was drafted into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His job was to analyse the Allied Press.
- By the end of the war, Hahn became private secretary to Prince Max of Baden.
- He made connections with many influential people and conspired for Prince Max of Baden to become the last German Imperial Chancellor on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1918.



# Prince Max and the end of the war

- Germany accepted defeat in 1918 and had to negotiate terms with the victors. Max resigned after 40 days, the Kaiser abdicated, and Germany became a parliamentary democracy.
- Hahn acted as a government emissary following the end of hostilities. He was a member of the German delegation to the Peace Conference in Versailles.
- Hahn fought for a peaceful revision of the treaty.
- After the war, he returned with Prince Max to his castle at Salem in Baden and helped him write his memoirs, which appeared in 1927.
- Hahn's educational work had its roots in his political experiences.



Prince Max of Baden

# Salem School

- Prince Max wanted his son Berthold to be educated with local children and Hahn founded Salem in 1920, in a section of his castle.
- Enrolment was soon rapid. Starting with 3 girls and 1 boy, by 1933 there were over 380 pupils from 11 nations, including 5 stateless pupils. It expanded to become 5 schools. It continues to this day.
- The most pressing task was to heal the German nation and save the younger generation from falling victim to the moral degeneration, which calamity had brought on the German people.

Salem is  
short for  
Jerusalem  
and  
means  
peace.







Salem is in southern Germany near Lake Constance



# Activities included...

In school:

- Morning run, mid-morning athletics break;
- Individual projects;
- 2 afternoons a week working on the school farm;
- Saturday afternoons devoted to guilds – naturalists, land workers, mechanics, drama, literature and archaeology
- Metalwork, carpentry, choir, school fire department;

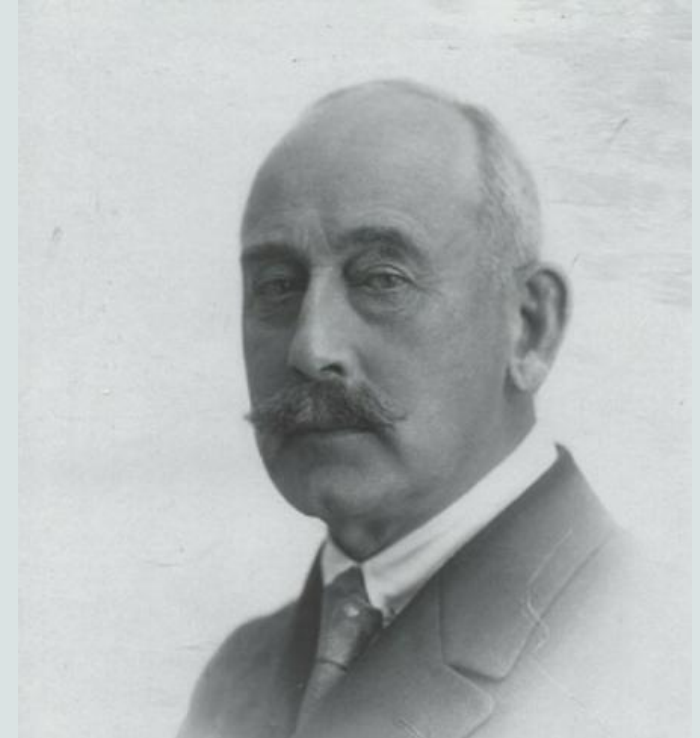
Other activities included:

- ‘War sports’- military drill and camps for military sports organized by the Stahlhelm, rifle shooting, building gliders;

In the countryside:

- cycle and mountain walking tours; map making, expeditions abroad, skiing.

Pupils worked towards the German Sports Badge.



Prince Max of Baden



# Salem Laws

“Nobody is allowed to be a passenger, everyone belongs to the ship’s crew,” said Hahn.

- 
- Give the children opportunities for self-discovery.
  - Make the children meet with triumph and defeat.
  - Give the children the opportunity of self-effacement in the common cause.
  - Provide periods of silence.
  - Train the imagination.
  - Make games important but not pre-dominant.
  - Free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating sense of privilege.

# Challenging Nazism

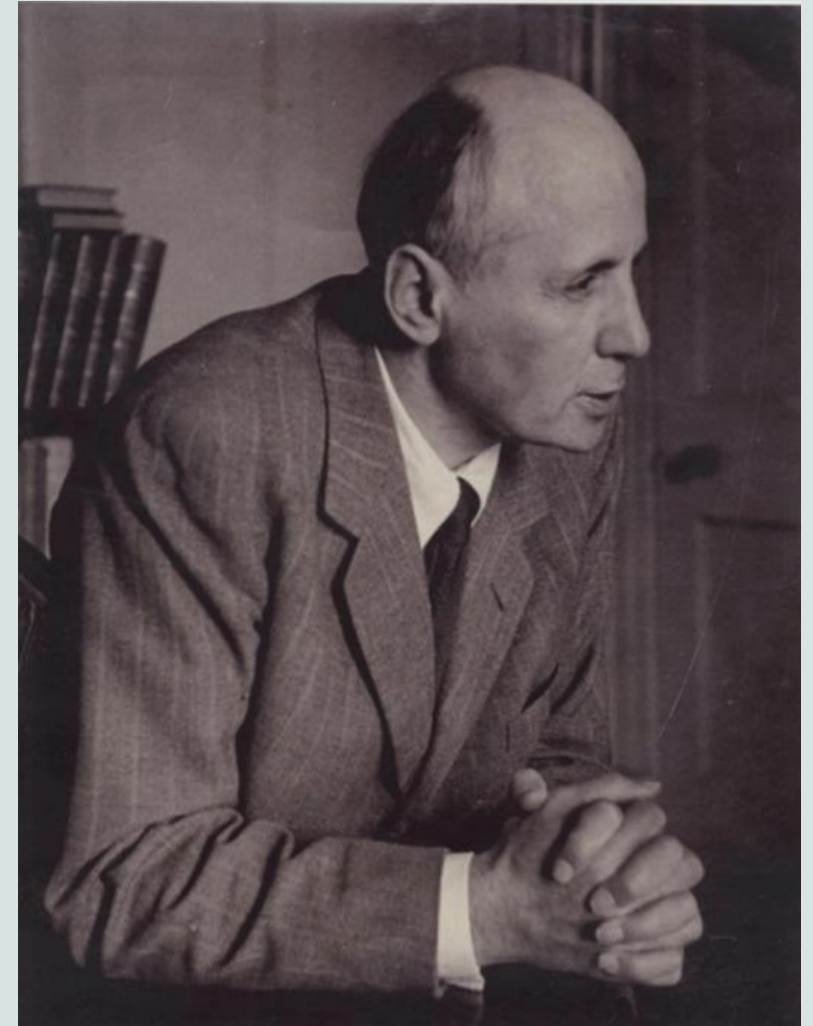
- Hahn was subject to threats and attacks, his Jewish background giving aggressors ammunition.
- August 1932: Hahn openly challenged Hitler over his telegram of support to 5 Nazi thugs who had trampled a young communist to death in Potempa, Upper Silesia, in front of his mother. The men were in prison under death sentences. The death sentences were commuted soon afterwards. The men were released and publicly celebrated when Hitler came to power on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933.
- February/ March 1933, Hahn spoke out in Hamburg, Gottingen and Berlin. He asked Salem former students to either break with Hitler or break with Salem.
- Hahn was imprisoned on the 11th March. There were immediate protests from influential English friends, and he was released on March 16<sup>th</sup> following intervention from PM Ramsay MacDonald, but he was banished from Baden and forbidden access to the school.
- Hahn went into hiding.

# Fleeing Germany

- Berthold, son of Prince Max and Hahn's first pupil, strongly supported him.
- At Salem, there were Nazi incursions into the life and spirit of the school. Jews were not accepted from 1935 onwards, and little is known about the fate of Salem's Jewish pupils, although some followed him to Scotland.
- The Nazis were keen to see the school allied with the regime and reacted strongly when Markgraf Berthold wanted to close it. It was eventually taken over and turned into a Napola, Nazi elite training school for future political and military leaders.
- After a warning that he was not safe from a former Salem pupil, Hahn left Germany and arrived in England on the 12th July, 1933.
- Hahn made great efforts to ensure the truth was known in Britain about Nazi atrocities. He remained a German patriot all his life.

# The Founding of Gordonstoun 1934

- When he left Germany at the age of 47, he was at first profoundly depressed. He had lost everything but was persuaded by many influential friends to start all over again.
- From just a handful of pupils, growth was rapid and by 1939 the total was 135. There were an increasing number of Germans, mostly Jewish boys and masters.
- Hahn helped to bring more Jewish Germans to the UK. He saved their lives.



Arrival from Salem in  
1933, age 47



Hahn already knew the area from his visits prior to WW1. The sea and the mountain environment brought new opportunities. Gordonstoun is close to Duffus and RAF Lossiemouth





## Activities included...

- Games and athletics, riding, orienteering, cycling, walking, climbing, skiing, camping trips and expeditions.
- Seamanship was prominent
- Student Guilds: farm, scouts, handicrafts, debating, literature, drawing, art, history, music, theatre, natural history.
- Individual projects and outside lecturers.
- Student staffed rescue services
  - Coastguard Service in 1935 known as the Watchers
  - Fire Brigade in 1941.
- Individual Training Plan
- Gordonstoun Sport Badge developed which later became the County Badge and involved project, expedition, service and sport.

# Underlying principles

Gordonstoun promotes personal growth and self-discovery through a variety of challenges and outdoor experiences.



**Self-Reliance:** Students develop independence and confidence in their abilities, preparing them for future challenges.

**Service to Others:** Instils a sense of community and responsibility, encouraging students to give back to society.

**Physical and Mental Endurance:** Prepares students to cope with life's challenges and enhances their resilience.

Gordonstoun became co-educational in 1972

## How did Prince Philip come to attend Gordonstoun?

- Born Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark in 1921, exiled from Greece at 18m old.
- Endured a very turbulent childhood, abruptly separated from his parents and four elder sisters at the age of 8.
- Mother, Princess Alice of Greece, profoundly deaf, hospitalized with schizophrenia in 1930.
- Father left him in the care of Alice's family, the Milford Havens and Mountbattens, in England.
- In 1933, 12-year-old Philip was sent to Schule Schloss Salem and stayed there for 2 terms. His sister, Theodora, had married Prince Max's son, Berthold, Margrave of Baden in 1931.



# From Salem to Gordonstoun

- On Philip's arrival at Salem it was observed that 'whenever the Nazi salute was given he roared with laughter. After he had been admonished to caution, he continued to be doubled up in uncontrollable mirth... He no longer roared but nevertheless attracted universal attention. We thought it better for him and also for us if he returned to England right away," said his sister Theodora.
- Philip was only the 10th pupil at Gordonstoun on his arrival there aged just 13 in 1934. He attended the school for 5 years until 1939.
- Gordonstoun provided Prince Philip with a much-needed sense of stability after the various upheavals of his childhood. Hahn was the prince's most influential mentor during his time there.
- According to his report, his marked trait was his undefeatable spirit.





# Prince Philip

The prince was universally trusted and liked at Gordonstoun.

He was a very successful athlete, captain of the hockey and cricket teams. He developed his love of sailing, which his prestigious Navy career can be traced back to.

He excelled in all areas and in his final year became guardian, or head boy, while previously being a watcher, as part of Gordonstoun's own Coastguard service.

He received the Senior Silver Moray Badge, which rewarded physical achievements, volunteering and expeditions

Gordonstoun instilled in him a sense of service, an element very much seen in his later life.



It was Hahn who broke the news to 16-year-old Philip of the death of his sister Cecilie, her husband and 2 children , in a plane crash in 1937.

The following year, Philip's uncle and guardian Lord Milford Haven died of cancer. His younger brother Lord Louis took parental responsibility for Philip for the remainder of his youth.



## After Gordonstoun

- Philip left the school to embark on his career at the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth and graduated top of his class in 1940.
- He was described as having unusual promise
- In July 1943, as second-in-command of Wallace, he saved his ship from a night bomber attack. He devised a plan to launch a raft with smoke floats that successfully distracted the bombers, allowing the ship to slip away unnoticed.
- He became one of the youngest first lieutenants and was promoted to commander in 1950.



- After the war, he worked as an instructor at the Navy's Leadership Establishment.
- He married Princess Elizabeth in 1947.
- His distinguished naval career came to an end when King George VI died in 1952.

# Visits to Gordonstoun

Philip continued to visit Gordonstoun throughout his life, even as recently as 2014. He declined to sit down and have his meal brought to him but instead joined pupils waiting in line for lunch.

His enthusiasm for the school always came through. When he came through Gordonstoun's gates, people generally said he had a spring in his step and he was delighted to get back and visit old haunts.

A visit in 2014



He had an immensely strong character, combined with a unique sense of fun, infectious optimism and strong sense of duty.

**Prince Philip  
with Kurt Hahn, the  
man who 'taught him  
to think'.**

‘History will probably judge him on his ideas, but as a Headmaster, I believe it was his absolute certainty about right and wrong, his utter conviction on morality and behaviour which made him such a stabilizing influence in developing community.’





## King Charles at Gordonstoun.

- The prince did not share the same enthusiasm as his father, and sometimes found it tough going, but also enjoyed aspects of the school.
- He admired Hahn and his educational philosophy.
- Princes Andrew and Edward also attended, as well as Princess Anne's children, Peter and Zara Phillips.



A young Prince Charles arrives for his first term at Gordonstoun school in 1962, accompanied by his father Prince Philip

# Outbreak of World War 2

- Gordonstoun had a number of German pupils, most of them Jewish. There was disquiet when war broke out. Hahn had taken British nationality in 1938 and was deprived of his German nationality soon after.
- The army commandeered Gordonstoun. The school moved to mid-Wales in June 1940. Around 30 boys moved to Aberdovey on the Welsh coast, due to lack of space.
- Hahn sorrowed for his 'erring homeland'. He was very active behind the scenes. His advice was 'No peace with the murderers. A Germany that has cleansed and liberated itself has nothing to fear from the West.'



# The Hess Affair May 1941

- Deputy Fuhrer Rudolf Hess landed by parachute in northern Scotland on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1941, after ejecting himself from a plane. His alleged mission was to seek peace with England. He asked to be taken to the Duke of Hamilton, a friend of Hahn.
- Hahn had connections with Hess and contributed to discussions.
- Hitler declared him insane.
- Hess was imprisoned, first in the Tower of London, then in Wales and Cornwall, for the remainder of the war. In 1946, he was sentenced to life imprisonment at the Nuremberg trials. He died aged 93 at Spandau prison in Berlin in 1987.



# Conclusion of War

- May 7<sup>th</sup> 1945: Victory and unconditional surrender.
- Hahn suffered dramatic mental breakdown after the strain of the war years.
- Suffering in Germany restored him to action. Hahn was prominent in seeking to restore amicable relations between Germany and the UK after the war. He went to Salem, then occupied by French Army. He reopened Salem as soon as was practicable in November 1945.
- He had great concern for the conditions of the German populations in East and Central Europe. He arranged for the first records of those who had resisted Nazism to be published.

## Gordonstoun after the war.

- At the outbreak of war, the army made use of Gordonstoun, but let it fall into disrepair. At the end of the war, Gordonstoun moved back to Scotland, but it was like starting again.
- Hahn came back to Britain, shattered. At this time, he converted to Christianity.
- The next few years were spent between Salem and Gordonstoun.
- In 1952 Hahn (aged 68) had a serious breakdown.
- His headship was now over, but after a period in Germany he went back to Gordonstoun, wanting one more year.

# The founding of Outward Bound 1941

- Nearby Aberdovey in Wales was the merchant navy training school, HMS Conway. Many young sailors' lives were being lost at sea due to torpedoing, a lack of stamina and morale.
- One of the Gordonstoun parents was Laurence Holt, head of the Blue Funnel Shipping Line. Holt discussed the problem with Kurt Hahn, who designed a 21-day programme to address the problem.
- The founding mission was to give young seamen the ability to survive harsh conditions at sea by teaching confidence, tenacity, perseverance and to build experience.
- The first Outward Bound School was launched at Aberdovey in 1941. The motto was 'to serve, to strive and not to yield.'



Useful skills in time of war - continued as challenging courses for 26 boys from industry. They were 'impelled into experience' through sea training and coastguardship.



# Outward Bound Courses



- Initially 4-week courses for industry, but now vary depending in the type of group.
- Participants divided into small groups under the guidance of an instructor.
- Confidence-building and problem-solving challenges take place, before heading off on an expedition.

The aims are to:

- Develop Leadership Skills
- Build Resilience
- Encourage Teamwork



# Outward Bound today

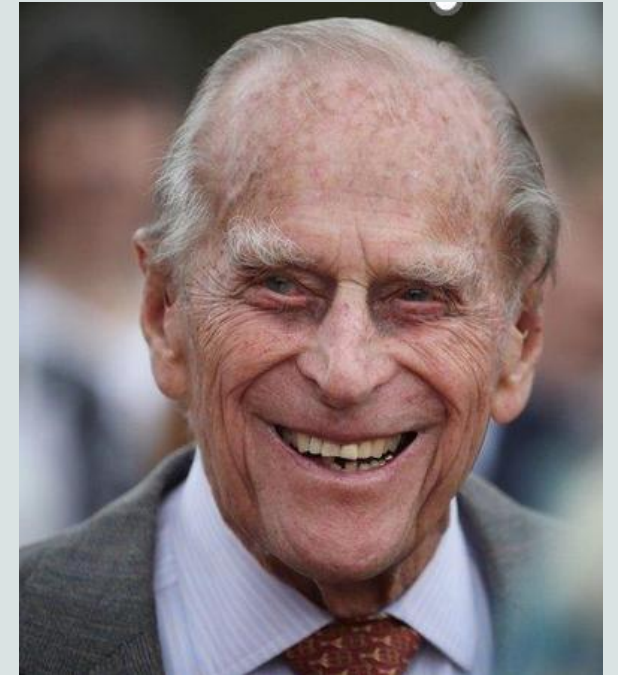
- Outward Bound is the oldest adventure-based educational organization in continuous operation in the world. 1.2 million people have been on an Outward Bound course in the UK since 1941
- Today there are schools in over 35 countries which are attended by more than 150,000 people each year. There are 6 schools in the UK.
- The first Outward Bound programme for women was held in 1951. Rhowniar in Wales was initially for girls. The centre was open for 35 years until 1998.
- Outward Bound helped to shape the U.S. Peace Corps and many other outdoor adventure programmes.





# Prince Philip and Outward Bound

- The Outward Bound Trust, was established as an educational charity in 1946 to operate the schools.
- The Duke of Edinburgh supported the charity from its outset, before becoming a Patron in 1953, included being an active Chairman for many years. His commitment spanned seven decades.
- When it was threatened with bankruptcy in the 1990s, the Duke of Edinburgh stepped in at the next board meeting, telling the trustees: “Now we shall proceed with rescuing Outward Bound.”



# The Founding of the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme



- Adapted from the Moray Badge at Gordonstoun; supported by the War Office it became the County Badge Scheme in 1941, but with two additional fields – a project, and a service requirement.
- Hahn approached one of his first and most famous Gordonstoun pupil for help in rolling it out across the country. Prince Philip chaired a meeting in 1954 at Buckingham Palace.
- The scheme was introduced in 1956 and extended to Borstals in 1957.
- Administered, and largely designed, by Sir John Hunt.
- It was designed to attract boys aged 15-18. In the first 12 months, 7,000 boys had enrolled for the scheme.



- The first girls were allowed to join in 1958.



# Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme

- The current award is open to 14-24 year olds.
- 3 progressive levels which: Bronze, Silver or Gold.
- 4 sections at Bronze and Silver level and 5 at Gold:
  - Volunteering
  - Physical recreation
  - Skills
  - Expedition
  - Working with a team on a residential activity. (Gold only)
- Entrants must keep an Activity log.



- Duration:
  - Bronze and Silver at least 6 months
  - Gold at least 12 months.

# Duke of Edinburgh Award Today

- Spread to 140 countries across the world and shaped the lives and careers of millions.
- More than four million people have taken part in since its inception
- A record **572,802** young people took part in a DofE programme in 2024-25 in the UK.
- Participants gave a staggering **5.2 million hours** of volunteering as part of their DofE activities,
- **30.8%** of 14 year olds across the UK started their Bronze DofE.
- Overall, **8.5%** of 14-18 year olds across the UK started a DofE programme in 2024-25, including those with additional needs.



Prince Edward became Patron of the scheme in 2023. He achieved the Gold Award in 1986, and has been a Trustee since 1988.

# Trevelyan Scholarships and the Kurt Hahn Trust

- Hahn was against narrow specialisation in the UK 6<sup>th</sup> Form, and argued for wider entry requirements
- Central requirement for the Trevelyan Scholarships at Oxford and Cambridge was the presentation of a project of exploration and investigation, carried to a well-defined end and reflecting enterprise, originality and character.
- The scheme calls for curricular reform. The International Baccalaureate has its origins in this scheme.
- The scheme lasted for 8 years, sponsored by United Steel (1958 – 1966)
- The Kurt Hahn Trust was founded in 1986 at Cambridge University to foster Anglo-German understanding and provides scholarships for German students to come to Cambridge University and vice-versa.

# The Founding of Atlantic College (now United World Colleges)

- In 1962 Hahn pioneered, the opening of Atlantic College at St. Donat's Castle in Wales, with the help Sir Lawrence Darvall.
- It opened with 9 teaching staff and 56 male students aged between 16 and 19 years, from 12 countries.
- In 1967, the school became co-educational, with a cohort from 35 nations.
- Hahn viewed education as a means of reducing national barriers and fostering international cooperation.
- From its founding, the school was intended to be the first of a series. Today, this is known as United World Colleges and has 18 schools and colleges on 4 continents.



St Donat's Castle is a 12<sup>th</sup> century castle on the South Wales coast. Lord Mountbatten the 1<sup>st</sup> president, and in 1978 this was passed on to Prince Charles for 15 years.



# Atlantic College curriculum

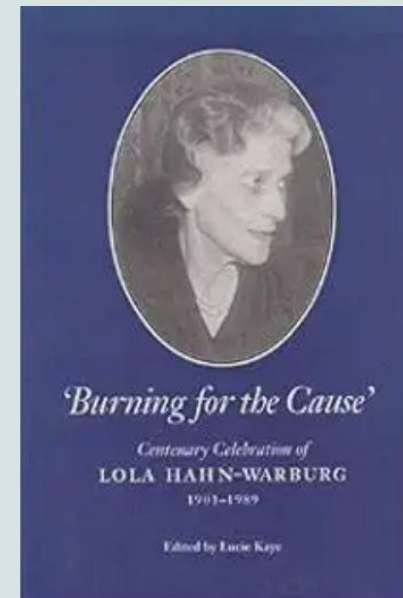
- Mission: "make education a force to unite people, nations, and cultures for peace and a sustainable future". It fosters a lifelong commitment to social responsibility.
- The 2 year "humanitarian curriculum" combines academic and experiential challenges
- It offers: \_\_\_\_\_
- International Baccalaureate.
- Weekly community service, physical activity, and creative activity.
- Annual 'Project Week', offering the chance to delve into either service or expedition- based experiences.
- Student-ran Conferences on a quarterly basis offering deep introspection into the chosen conference topic.
- Strong tradition of boat design and boat building. The Atlantic College Lifeboat Station was active from 1963, staffed mostly by students until 2013.

# Kurt Hahn and religion

- The Hahn family was assimilated as were many German Jews at that time.
- Hahn said: 'I am more proud than I can express about my Jewish being. Whatever I have been able to achieve in my life I owe to the drop of the blood of the prophets that I feel within me.'
- Nonetheless, he felt the religion of the Old Testament had been supplanted by the New. He was specially influenced by the Gospel of St Matthew and the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- Before conversion, he consulted Dr Leo Baeck, the Rabbi who had survived Theresienstadt, who gave his blessing.
- He was finally admitted to the Anglican Church in July 1945, and in August 1972, he was baptised in his German home Hermannsberg.
- He was aware that this hurt his brother Rudo and sister-in-law Lola.
- His educational programmes were neutral with regard to religion, but not indifferent.

# Lola Hahn-Warburg.

- Lola was the daughter of a leading Berlin banker and married Hahn's brother Rudo.
- She arrived in London after fleeing Germany in 1938 with her husband and two children. The family lost all their wealth.
- She joined the Central British Fund and led a delegation of British Jews to the Home Office to plead for persecuted German-Jewish children.
- She was a key member of the Committee for the Care of the Concentration Camp Children and played an important part in the pre-war Kindertransport. She was involved in the Windermere reception centre and was a vice-president of the Youth Aliyah movement.



# Kurt Hahn, the man

- A man of high moral principles and passionate conviction.
- An excellent writer and captivating speaker. Extraordinary ability to inspire people. No one who met him remained indifferent or forgot him.
- Remarkable memory for people, a networker; 'personality pouring off him in waves.' Gathered influential allies.
- A courtly, enigmatic and theatrical figure. A person of action more than words.
- Disregard of trivial conventions
- Fine judge of character of young people, but not always adults.
- His schools were his family.
- Long periods of absence from his schools, and frenetic activity when he returned.

# Kurt Hahn's later years

- Accepting retirement at last, Hahn lived at his home in Hermannsberg, Germany.
- Soon after Atlantic College was founded, his health began to fail. In 1970, he was struck by a car, and experienced a period of depression. he was often unhappy and sad in his later years.
- Despite this, he was constantly active, writing letters, meeting people, to people of influence: in Parliament, Universities, Public School, Diplomatic Service, Church, Military, Nobel Prize winners etc.
- He died in Germany on 14 December 1974 aged 88. His funeral took place at Salem where he was buried on December 20.
- The entry in Britain's Dictionary of National Biography calls him 'headmaster and citizen of humanity.'
- He was made a CBE, given the Grand Cross of Merit in Germany and received several honorary doctorates etc.





## World Holocaust Memorial Day 26/1/25

In a letter, the Princess Royal said: "This plaque will be a permanent monument, informing students, teachers and visitors of Kurt Hahn's bravery and accomplishments.

It will serve as a reminder of how it came to be that——  
Hahn came here to Gordonstoun and also serves as a warning of what happens when a society succumbs to the dangers of indifference in the face of extremism and racial hatred.

My late father, the Duke of Edinburgh, thrived during his time here and counted Kurt Hahn as a personal friend, having already benefited from his wisdom in the formative years in Germany. I am sure that he would have deeply approved of this unveiling."

A plaque was unveiled at Gordonstoun



# Quotes

I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion.

The passion of rescue reveals the highest dynamic of the human soul.

There are three ways of trying to win the young. You can preach at them—that is a hook without a worm. You can say, "You must volunteer"—that is of the devil. And you can tell them, "You are needed"—that appeal hardly ever fails.

# Quotes

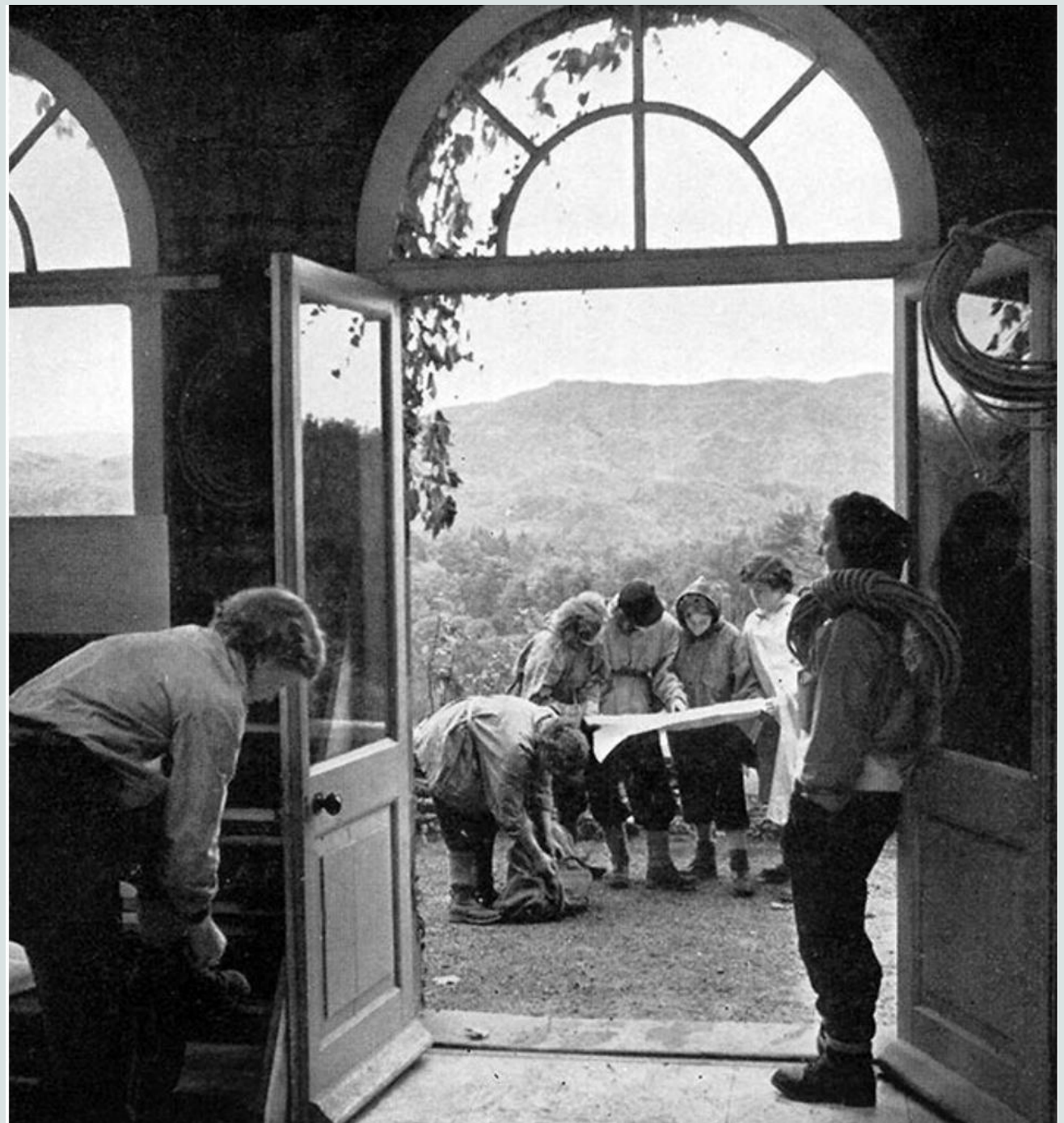
‘Plus est en vous’ (Motto of Gordonstoun). There is more in you than you think, which he interpreted to mean there is more strength, more courage and more compassion in a person than he ever imagined.

Your disability is your opportunity.

Kurt Hahn's values and principles are still as relevant today as they were a century ago and continue to shape educational thought.

They continue to be in action throughout the world today.

“It was the passion of his life, his life's work: to help as many people as possible to fulfil their own promise, to be the best they can be, to live with courage, compassion and love. Through help to those ‘in danger and in need’ youth can strike the deepest chords of the human spirit.





# Discussion and Questions



Kurt Hahn in 1955