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## Remembering Reg Revans: Action Learning's Principal Pioneer

*Albert E. Barker*

This historical sketch of the life of Reg Revans, my close friend and colleague for many years, is based on innumerable conversations with him, input from his family and friends, and access to his personal records. Reg eschewed biographies and other forms of personal recognition but, in his later years, he became more receptive to providing me with information on which a profile of his life could be based.

I am honored to have been his friend. Like others he was closely associated with, he gave of himself freely. Each of us learned much from him. His life was marked by generosity and he had little regard for money or materialistic things. When he visited organizations to advise them on action learning, he almost never asked a fee. At the most, he usually received only a small honorarium and transportation expenses. He lived a simple Spartan existence and ate sparingly. It was discovered years after he had worked in Belgium, gaining a pension entitlement, that he had never claimed it. In 1994, as preparations advanced for an Action Learning and Mutual Collaboration Congress at Heathrow in England, Reg learned that several Eastern Europeans did not have the money to attend. He quietly came up with the money from his meager savings.

His interest was in making the world a better place and promoting the kind of dialogue that could advance understanding. Action learning was his instrument for doing this. One of his most common statements in beginning a conversation was, "All the world is discovering action learning".

In 1998, I prepared a more abbreviated profile on Reg's life as part of a special issue of the *Performance Improvement Quarterly* on action learning. However, what appears in this book chapter is far and away the most comprehensive statement on Revans' life in print.

## Early years

Reginald William Revans was born on May 14, 1907 in the town of Portsmouth, a shipping and naval center on the south coast of England. Within a year or so, his father's occupation as a marine surveyor took the family north to live at Grafton Street, Cloughton, in Birkenhead.<sup>1</sup> Revans mother (who held strong beliefs) made a practice of engaging in voluntary work. In fact, she helped out at the local hospital when there was no significant national health care provision. In 1910, when Revans was three-years-old, Florence Nightingale died. A memorial service was held which his mother, along with nurses whom he knew, all attended. Reg remembered them all being dressed in black for the occasion.

When Revans was about five-years-old, the family moved to 38 Foxbourne Road, Ballam, London. Reg attended the local Church of England primary school while his father carried out his duties as "His Majesty's Principal Surveyor of Mercantile Shipping" – he was highly involved in the inquiry into the *Titanic* Disaster. Revans remembers a procession of seafaring visitors to the family home. Some of the visitors, sailors and their families alike, were barefooted, so poorly were seamen paid in those days. As a teenager, he later asked his father to tell him the most important lesson he learned from the tragedy of the *Titanic*. His father took several days to consider the question and then responded: "We must learn the distinction between cleverness and wisdom". Even in his nineties, Revans still insisted that his father's answer to this probing question was one of the most important incidents of his life. Certainly, we see the young Revans already asking "Why?" type questions (associated with the quest for *understanding*) instead of the more common "What?" type questions (seeking basic *knowledge*).

At the age of eleven, the time came to consider secondary education. Both family and teachers alike were delighted and confident that young Reg would pass the entrance exam to one of London's most prestigious colleges – The Christ's Hospital School. However, Revans argued strongly against this. Reg had discovered that the traditional uniform at this school included yellow socks and a frock coat. There was no way he was going to walk the streets of London dressed like that. Despite his more than token resistance, he was firmly taken to the school to sit the required tests. Eventually, the results of the entrance exams came out, and for the first (and only) time in his life, he was adjudged to have failed the exam. So objectionable did Reg find yellow socks and a frock coat that he had simply written his name at the top of the page and nothing else whatever! This determination to stick to his views on

a matter of principle was later to show itself more than once during his life. And so it was that Revans went to Battersea Grammar School instead.

From an early age, Revans showed a great affection for music and his mother remarked on his particular affection for the symphonies of Brahms; Revans told her how he was fascinated by the elegant simplicity of the melodic themes. He was interested in art too; indeed, he was so frequent a visitor to the local gallery (in London) that he was allowed not only to view those works on display, but also – as a teenager – to handle the paintings being kept in storage down in the vaults. Later, he took up painting and his work includes a portrait of his second wife Norah. The Revans' archives contain a number of his sketches, but most of the canvasses have been dispersed over the years. Neither was the teenage Revans a recluse nor nonparticipative child, for he engaged healthily in sports and, soon, his remarkable athletic prowess also began to assert itself. It was probably not surprising that he passed the entrance exams for both Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

When Revans subsequently attended an interview at Oxford, his idea was to study chemistry. The interviewing tutor, satisfied with his applicant's answers, asked one final question; "And what do you intend to do after Oxford has awarded you a fine degree in chemistry, young Revans?" Revans' innocent answer surprised the don; "I want to become a portrait artist!", he said – a reply which terminated the proceedings to the sound of application papers being torn up in disgust at what the tutor considered would be a waste of an excellent Oxford degree. Revans learned this worldly lesson well, for some years later – when invited to become a postgraduate researcher at Emmanuel College, Cambridge – Revans made no mention whatsoever of his interest in painting portraits.

## **Student years**

On leaving Battersea Grammar School, Revans went to study at University College, London (1925–1928). Again, his talent and determination were noticed, not least when he soon started to get bored and insisted (against the wishes of his tutor, Professor Porter) on taking his physics finals after only two years instead of the normal three.

Not only did he pass his degree exams, but also won the prize as best student – not only for physics, but in the whole university (the Lord Rayleigh Prize). Paradoxically, he then spent a third year (1928) at University College – but now helping a hard-pressed professor with his research program. His athletic endeavors also continued apace.

As a result of World War I, Germany was banned from participating in the Olympic Games. Athletes from other countries decided to lobby against this and, in 1927, a party was assembled to visit Hannover where the International Olympic committee had its headquarters. Revans was a member of the delegation, and told friends of an event that had taken place during that visit. In the very hall where they were sitting at that time, Brahms had been a soloist at the world premier performance of his first piano concerto. At the end the first movement, the audience had taunted one of Germany's greatest composers. He was derided and ridiculed, shouted at and sneered at, and told to stop playing such rubbish forthwith. Revans told the assembly in Hanover that only when one is being lampooned and scoffed at by self-appointed "experts" can one be sure that one is offering something of any true worth. Later in life, he reminds us of others who have occasioned the same lesson. Revans was only 20-years-old when he addressed this august gathering. His declaration at this assembly had relevance throughout his life. He encountered frequent resistance to his views, but never wavered in his beliefs.

Revans was awarded the Sudbury–Hardiman Research Studentship at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and from 1929 to 1930 undertook post-graduate research for his doctorate there. His intellectual gifts and hard work, as well as his athletic talents, won him the unusual distinction of a double blue – recognizing both academic and sporting achievements. Apart from his athletic endeavors and continued interest in art, he found time to play the trumpet and meet John Maynard Keynes. He also met with other twentieth-century giants, including Russell, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Eddington, Bohr, and Einstein. Revans was now ensconced at Emmanuel College researching his doctoral thesis as the last doctoral student of J. J. Thomson, father of the electron. Revans also worked in the Cavendish Laboratory, where Rutherford became the new head of the laboratory when Thomson retired from this post in 1919. He went on become the Master of Trinity College. While Reg was at the laboratory, Rutherford was busy splitting the atom, James Chadwick discovered the neutron (1932) and Patrick M. S. Blackett pursued operational research (he was later to win the Nobel Prize in physics in 1948).

### **Other postgraduate activities**

Those who have ever followed an intense individual athletic pursuit, or who have stood alone against another in a boxing ring, will know that the struggle they face also includes a battle to discover themselves and,

in these circumstances, there is nowhere to hide from the truth; this process, too, was one that Reg was discovering during those Cambridge days and which was later recognized as part of the process he came to call "System Gamma".

Athletic meetings took him to inter-varsity tournaments in the U.K., Europe, and America – where he participated with the joint Oxford–Cambridge team against the Ivy League Universities, and for the Empire against the U.S.. Athletics persistently occupied him and he maintained his Olympic standards, specializing in the long jump and the triple jump. His Cambridge long jump record stood for over 30 years (1929–1962).

As a physicist, Revans was fascinated by the question of how the sun produced such prodigious amounts of energy on a continuing basis. He calculated that there was enough energy produced from one square centimeter of the sun's surface to power the biggest ship across the Atlantic – and the sun was 800,000 miles in diameter. Indeed, decades later our science fiction writers speak of spaceships using ion drives and solar winds as their source of power to explore the universe. (They would have to harvest energy since they could not carry a sufficient amount from launch.)

In 1930, a Commonwealth Fund Fellow award was granted, entitling Revans to study at any American university of his choice. He had already seen the halls of Yale and Harvard and, instead, he chose Michigan. It was here that he became friendly with Raul Wallenberg of the Swedish banking family – a man who went on to save thousands of Jewish lives during World War II by granting them Swedish passports, but only to disappear himself behind Soviet lines in 1945 under rather mysterious circumstances at the close of hostilities. (It was only admitted recently that he died in their custody). During his time in the USA, Revans took the opportunity to travel extensively around America, for the most part in his Ford open tourer, with fuel at 3 cents a gallon. He came to love the land and its remarkable people.

## **Seeds of action learning**

While Revans was at the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge, there were 30 to 40 people there. More than a dozen of them were current or "about-to-be" Nobel Laureates; probably the greatest assembly of brains at one time in one place that the world has ever known. Some of the notions that later became action learning were undoubtedly formed during his two spells at Cambridge.

When Rutherford took over from Thomson as head of the Cavendish, he instituted a pattern of regular meetings; every other week there would be a general meeting at which a talk would be given by one of the researchers – each person “volunteering” in turn. Rutherford’s guidance was, “Bring me each week something we all believe – but which can’t be true”.<sup>2</sup>

Every other Wednesday, at 4:00 pm, the researchers – each engaged in their own project – would meet together to discuss progress or lack of it. Some 15 or 20 out of the 30 assigned to the Laboratory would turn up – but not necessarily the same people each week. The spirit was one of struggle with the unknown, the bartering of ignorance, the quest to uncover another layer of particle physics only to find themselves presented with even greater mysteries. One afternoon in 1932, following a session by Chadwick, Revans recalls Rutherford saying: “Well, gentlemen, what has impressed me the most these last few hours is the extent of my own ignorance; what does yours look like to you?”<sup>3</sup>

What Revans later called “Q” (Questioning Insight) was present and provided by all. At the same time “P” (text book knowledge, established learning) was also present in copious amounts. The result was “L” – pivotal new learning which provided the basis for further “P”. While Revans did not see the process at the time as the Learning Equation (something he arrived at later), what he appears to have been most impressed with was the spirit of the group and the personal changes that their struggles at the frontiers of science and knowledge were invoking. Not the least among them was the presence of a humility which enabled them to recognize the boundaries of their own understanding, and the appreciation that, until this was accepted, no further genuine progress could be made (what Revans came to call “Gamma”). For what they had to confront, above all else, was not their individual brilliance and understanding but their ignorance! This spiritual quality – both displayed by and generated among those intellectual giants – is quite contrary to the modern ethos of academic certitude and management consultant infallibility.

While what Winston Churchill later called “the gathering storm” began to assemble across Europe, Revans continued his work at the Cavendish Laboratory (1932–1935). Already, some were beginning to ask questions about the moral implications which might arise from the abuse of the new knowledge in the field of particle physics. It was between 1932 and 1935 that Revans met, and was impressed by, both Canon Collins and Bertrand Russell. He recalled the severe reservations of a Canadian from Montreal named Ferdinand Terroux, who also

worried about the morality of the direction of physics research.<sup>4</sup> It was not until 1945 that Einstein lamented, saying – “If only I had known I should have become a watchmaker” (referring to use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, Japan).<sup>5</sup>

As their individual work progressed at the Cavendish, the interest displayed by government departments grew, particularly those concerned with military matters. The use of what might be made of their particle research became a disturbing factor at the Cavendish. In 1935, somewhat disenchanted and worried about the nature of the primary interest that the Cavendish research was now attracting, Revans left the Laboratory to become the Deputy Chief Education Officer for the County Council of Essex. It was now that his thoughts began to focus upon the learning process.

## **War clouds over Europe**

By the 1930s, the East End of London had long-suffered from overcrowding and its elderly buildings were now neither healthy to live in nor otherwise suitable for modern needs. A new town was called for and this became “Dagenham”; it was located eastwards along the northern bank of the Thames. Large companies were attracted and its most famous industrial employer was the Ford Motor Company. When Revans arrived to take up his post as Deputy Chief Education Officer, Dagenham came within his area of responsibility. The planners had overlooked a few basic infrastructural needs, such as schools. Revans found himself facing the urgent task of establishing a number of large new schools.

During this short prewar period, Revans was approached by a colleague who had responsibility for the health needs of Essex. His problem centered on the shortage of nurses. They were being lost at a high rate during their training period. What was the problem in educating nurses that produced such a high rate of attrition? Revans was approached for solutions based on his responsibility for education services. This was another key point in Revans' life, for it was where he came in contact with problems of health care – an area that occupied much of his efforts over succeeding decades. Revans set out to investigate the cause of attrition. He soon encountered a culture that did not encourage the young trainees.

The idea that 18–20-year-old girls could possibly contribute to how a hospital ward might be organized and patients better cared for was simply ludicrous in the eyes of their “superiors”. Revans recalled (usually

with some anger) how they were referred to as “ignorant young sluts”. Such then, was the ethos which drove the resultant paper, written in the form of a memorandum to the Essex Education Committee in 1938, and it led him to deal with the issue in a manner which establishes it as the first work in the field of what came to be known later as “Action Learning”.<sup>6</sup>

Other seeds of later learning were also beginning to emerge, including the conviction that “Unless those trying to run an organization – like Ford Motor Company – understand that they only know their problems if they understand *what the workers* are thinking” will progress be possible.<sup>7</sup> However, Revans’ words were not well received. The following year, the storm clouds broke and the war was finally unleashed across the whole of Europe.

### **Management by fire**

Now in his early thirties, Revans was placed in charge of Emergency Services for the East End of London. This was to be his debut in the field of practical “here-and-now” management. There was no theory he could fall back on when dealing with Hitler’s blitz on London (and the East End saw the worst of it). “That which we must learn to do we learn to do by doing”, said Aristotle and this was eminently true for Revans at the time. It was practical, urgent, crisis management of the most intense character with death, destruction, air raids, incendiary driven fire storms and daily bombing.

Everything was a problem. Manpower was short and not physically the best (all the fittest young men had been called to arms). Equipment was scarce, severe usage brought problems of reliability, water mains burst and water supplies were cut off, gas mains breached and burned insatiably, electricity was missing or jury-rigged, buildings were reduced to dangerous shells, bodies were found and others “disappeared”, rats became a health hazard, teams worked nonstop shifts, injuries brought even more crew shortages, some streets no longer existed and others were impassable. Food was short and, for most of the time, the infrastructure was wrecked. Revans even lost his car and all his clothes when it was hit by a bomb. He took it personally and never drove again.

Those who see Revans as an academic – a guru of management theory – should dwell for a while upon this period of his life where he crammed more practical crisis management experience into those war years than many people encounter in the whole of their lives.

Revans was a practitioner of management in the most demanding and dire circumstances. Revans would say, practicing management and learning about management are one and the same thing.<sup>8</sup>

## **Coal Board**

As the end of the war approached, plans were in hand to restructure much of British Industry. The coal mining industry was to be nationalized (1947), bringing about 1000 separate collieries into a single entity employing about a 700,000 people. Revans was chosen to be responsible for education and training, and he produced a plan for these activities in October 1945.<sup>9</sup> Revans' reaction, and it was typical of him, was to draw on his still persisting physical fitness and to proceed north to Durham; there he spent a number of weeks working down in the mines at the coalface with rough and robust miners well-educated in the harsh facts of mining operations. Not for Revans the modern practice of assuming expertise about something one has never done oneself!

It was during this coalface interlude that another important observation emerged for Revans amongst these perspiring miners, who were highly reliant on each other for their safety and successful team work. He saw a spirit that reminded him of that which had prevailed at the Cavendish Laboratory amongst Nobel Laureates in the 1930s. It was another clue that contributed to the ideas that became action learning.

Revans was convinced that colliery managers would learn more from each other than from prefabricated theories concocted by absentee management consultants who have neither never heard the chorus of miners' boots – nor ever been down in a mine. He championed a Staff College to be staffed by colliery managers. He researched and evaluated the consequences of what he called "Adverse Size Effect" and wrote an early paper entitled "Small is Dutiful". Further detailed studies confirmed this theme (that the smaller collieries performed more effectively than the larger ones). Eventually the Coal Board's Economic Adviser (E. F. Schumacher) came around to Revans' way of thinking and published a book, "Small is Beautiful" in 1973.

Revans wrote that:

My experiences...brought me to question whether the senior brethren of the industry could teach their successors much worth knowing, since so many seemed largely incapable of learning anything themselves.

...

To put it simply, the elegant self-assurance of the plans prepared by the high-level experts were no match for the robust vulgarity of the colliery yard...It was impossible to open up any discussion of size-effects as communication, morale, and autonomous learning...To most servants of the Coal Board in 1950, as to those of the National Health Service today, the key to successful reorganization...is still a matter of the "right" central plans fed into the "right" administrative structure.<sup>10</sup>

## **Manchester University**

Upon leaving the Coal Board, which was increasingly run by bureaucrats and administrators far removed from both the pit faces and dawn choruses alike, Revans became Professor of Industrial Administration at the University of Manchester, starting in 1955 and ending in 1965.

Michael Bowman, at Revans' ninetieth birthday celebration, told the story of his interview for the post. As he sat before the panel, a senior member recollected Revans' career as an athlete and Olympic jumper – also his penchant for leaping over bars (as in "pub") when suitably provoked. "Go on Reg, jump over the table", came the challenge – and that is exactly what he did! Not surprisingly, very little else seems to have been remembered about the interview by anyone, including Reg.

Projects undertaken during this period included an experiment in Lancashire factories which showed that it was possible to quantify workers' feelings about management – confirming that the art of listening is highly desirable.<sup>11</sup> He also introduced "The Manchester Schools Project", showing that teaching styles affect the incidence and degree of antisocial behavior. Studies also included an effort to understand more fully how nurses, factory workers and management might learn how to better collaborate together.

It was during this period that Lord Pratt (as he later became) asked Revans to look at the problem of loss of nurses in the Manchester area during their training years. Echoes of 1938 rang in Revans' ears and he approached the problem in typical Revans fashion. Talks took place with nurses and trainees themselves, and much was learned when confidence and trust had been gained over a cup of tea at three o'clock in the morning, when wards were quiet and senior staff mostly sound asleep.

Analysis of sickness, accident and absenteeism records (indicators of low morale) showed that there was an extremely strong correlation

between the incidence of these factors and the size of the hospital. When nurses were working in the larger hospitals, the records showed staff being off work not only more frequently, but also for longer periods than when they were working in the smaller hospitals: more evidence that "Small is Dutiful".

Revans advocated the idea of Business Schools and, in 1965, funds became available to set up within the University "The Manchester Business School". His notion had been that such an institution would be along the lines of the Coal Board Staff College (based at Nuneaton, manned by colliery staff themselves) and Revans wanted the same approach for the Business School concept: that it would be manned by business people themselves who would "learn with and from each other", creating their own resource, identifying their own problems and formulating their own solutions.

Revans recalled how this idea was greeted with derision by his academic colleagues. Businessmen were to have nothing to do with the diagnosis or choice of solutions. It led to a parting of the ways, since Revans and the rest of the faculty were like oil and water. It was a case of inbred traditions trumping new ways of thinking about management and business.

### **The Belgian years (1965–1975)**

Revans left Manchester and, from 1965 to 1968, he worked out of Brussels as the research fellow of the European Association of Management Training Centers (EAMTC). This was a loose federation of over 40 institutions of university rank from 14 different countries in Western Europe. Revans himself indicates how this research came about:

I had been President of this Association and was familiar with its endeavors to make more realistic much of its work. My task had been to visit its constituent members and to interest them in trying to develop a research culture specific to European management as such.<sup>12</sup>

Revans highlighted the need for the active participation of managers themselves, and one of the most interesting features of the report is reference to the recommendations made to the Harvard Business School by its Dean, George F. F. Lombard:

After learning of the efforts being made to bring the universities and business more closely together through management development

now known as action learning, Dean Lombard strongly urged his own colleagues to build upon the European example.<sup>13</sup>

Lombard emphasized Revans' message; namely, that "a central problem of organizations was for managers to understand the effects of their management upon those being managed".<sup>14</sup>

From 1968, Revans started to work officially for the Fondation Industrie-Université in Brussels as well, where his main focus of work at this time was the design and implementation of the Inter-University Advanced Management Program launched in 1968. Belgium had a population of approximately 10 million at the time. It stood at the bottom of the international league of OECD nations in terms of year-on-year improvement in economic performance. Traditional economic measures had been tried but without much impact. It was becoming imperative to improve the country's economic performance and the Inter-University Advanced Management Program was designed to meet these ends.<sup>15</sup> The five universities of Belgium that had an interest in management training collaborated together and involved themselves with Belgium's 23 largest organizations, between them representing 52 percent of the country's capital base.

Action learning was used as a major tool for addressing the complex and daunting problems being experienced by these lead organizations. As designed, senior executives from one industry were asked to examine a major problem in another industry for which they had no expertise or background. It was Revans' technique for breaking them away from ingrained assumptions and arriving at fresh questions. The executives were organized into action learning sets (teams) of five, where they could exchange views on what they were experiencing and learning; learning from and with one another in the process. Additionally, executives were matched and exchanged between industries as a part of the process.

Within a few short years, Belgium moved from the bottom of the OECD league in terms of its year-on-year improvement right to the top, ahead of Germany, Japan and the U.S. The Inter-University Advanced Management Program had undoubtedly contributed to this end. The King of the Belgians made Revans a Chevalier – a Knight of the Order of Leopold – in recognition of his efforts.

### **The Hospital Internal Communications (HIC) Project**

Also started in 1964–1965 (at the end of his time at the University of Manchester) was the Hospital Internal Communications (HIC) Project,

involving London hospitals. This project ran concurrently with the project in Belgium. It involved ten London hospitals that came together in a program of action learning. Within these hospitals the general wards were mainly involved, while the gynecological wards chose not to participate. This was a blessing in disguise, for it enabled controlled comparisons to be made. Note was also taken of socioeconomic intake, and other factors, in order to ensure that other effects would not distort the picture. Neither was this a data-starved study, with the resultant statistics arising from a few dozen or a few hundred events. Indeed, the figures were of great statistical significance – involving 33,000 participating general medical and surgical cases compared with 29,000 obstetric and gynecological patients whose wards were not involved in the program.<sup>16</sup>

What was the outcome? Morale indicators all improved (absenteeism, minor accidents, staff turnover). Hospital “hotel” costs improved on a per patient basis (such as linen and kitchen services), and the waiting lists disappeared. Eventually Professor George Wieland of the University of Michigan devoted two years to an in-depth study of the program. He identified the cause of the mysterious disappearing wait lists. He took a look at the average lengths of stay of the patients and noted that, while there had been little change in nonparticipating wards, there had been a 25 percent drop in the average length of stay among patients in those wards participating. Quite simply, patients had been getting better more quickly. Intercommunications had been improved as a result of the program – better communication between nurses with physicians, between patients and physicians, between family members and hospital staff. It elevated staff morale and, when morale is high, performance improves and patients benefit both physically and nonphysically to the extent that they recover more quickly.

## From Higher Downs

By 1974–1975 Revans left Belgium and resettled permanently in the U.K., when he was around 70-years-old, but the only retiring he did was to his home at 8 Higher Downs, Bowden, Altrincham, Cheshire. His activity level remained high. He was an advisor to the General Electric Company's executive program at this time. Books, too, continued to appear. In 1980, *Action Learning: New Techniques in Management* was published. His mammoth work *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* was published in 1982, to be followed quickly by *The ABC of Action Learning* (1983) and *Confirming Cases* (1985).

In 1995, the University of Salford in Manchester created the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research, and Revans' archive, containing many of his papers together with some unpublished books, were moved there. For many years, Janet Craig, a close friend of Revans, would spend a week or so each month organizing the archives and attempting to retain as much as possible for posterity. In an archive review in the late 1980s, it was found that Revans had upwards of 600 correspondents of which 400 were judged to be current (i.e., active within the last six to nine months).

As a hobby, Revans indulged in woodwork, with the home containing bookcases, cabinets, frames, benches, chairs and tables which he had either made from scratch or adapted.

An event that occurred near the end of his time at Higher Downs was the Action Learning and Mutual Collaboration Congress, held at Heathrow, England in 1995. Over 80 people from 17 countries attended the congress. Emphasis was on inviting practitioners, rather than an abundance of academics or consultants. As a follow-on to the Congress, international collaboration was fostered among the academic centers of Salford (U.K.), Richmond, Virginia, and Atlanta (U.S.), and Ballarat (Australia), each with their collaborative networks as well. Lex Dilworth of Virginia Commonwealth University described it as a "network of networks".

## **From Tilstock**

Shortly after the death of his wife Norah, Revans (now approaching 90-years-old) moved to Tilstock near Whitechurch to live with his eldest daughter Marina. As we have already mentioned, his archive and many books were moved to the University of Salford where they were incorporated into the university library. After an initial absence, visitors began to attend Revans at Tilstock – and his pattern of response remained the same. His mind remained sharp and perceptive.

In 1996, a Summer Program was held at the University of Salford involving 31 graduate students from the United States, Canada and Australia. Lex Dilworth from Virginia Commonwealth University, and David Botham, Director of the Revans Centre (then renamed the Revans Institute for Action Learning and Research) at the University of Salford, partnered in setting up this two-week program. Revans participated throughout. This was an intense action learning experience involving major problems facing two large hospitals in the Manchester area and the National Health Service.

## Basics of action learning

Revans made a concerted effort to have us understand action learning, even though we may never fully understand action learning itself. Revans resisted the temptation to define action learning or prescribe restrictive parameters. If we are to understand the man at all, it is through his lifelong deeds. They provide abundant clues.

He tells us that we should be "Learning from and with each other" and he gave us the learning equation as a guide. [Q=Questioning Insight, P=our text book or established knowledge, and L=Learning.] The Learning Equation he described as  $L=P+Q$ , but with the Q being the first thing to be addressed.

With System Alpha, Revans shows us a means of strategic analysis posing three Diagnostic and three Therapeutic Questions (i.e., What's happening?, What ought to be happening?, and How do we make it happen?). The five steps of System Beta spell out the process which also reflects our natural approach – Survey, Decision, Action, and Review, leading to Learning. System Gamma addresses the symbiosis of Alpha and Beta, and emerging from within the Learning Equation – reflects the changes which must take place within ourselves for any *real* learning to have taken place.<sup>17</sup>

Revans would say that the fresh questions he is asking us to consider are not new at all, and he refers us to the Karma, Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Christ and Mohammed, to name but a few:

Who am I?  
What can I know?  
What ought I to do?  
What is the Nature of our being?  
What is our Place and Purpose in the Universe?

## Anecdotes

During the 1980s, two Nobel Prize winners had their prize stripped from them when it was discovered that they had falsified their data results. Revans (who knew the integrity of the Nobel laureates he worked with in the 1930s) was deeply dismayed, but not surprised. We are told that one day, in 1987, the phone rang at Higher Downs and it was a request from a Scandinavian body that wished to nominate Revans for the 1988 Nobel Prize for Economics. Revans apparently told them, "I know nothing about economics" and hung up the phone. He did not seek awards.

He was also a passionate opponent of the use of jargon, and management jargon was high on his list of pretentious twaddle. He noted that academics of almost any hue can resort to mumbo-jumbo to baffle their audience and hype their own image. Said Revans: "It is the lifelong ambition of every professor to give a lecture about which no one in the audience understands a single bloody word".<sup>18</sup>

His view of facilitators (for action learning sets) were very clear indeed, though some refuse to understand his message when he says they are "for-silly-taters" (idiots). He also speaks of facilitation as "apprenticeship for White collar crime" and facilitators as "supernumeraries".

Revans was always abstemious about food, but even he could not do without it. When he did eat, his choice was heavily fish or dairy oriented. He consumed copious amounts of milk, cheese, cream, and butter. Salt was used liberally, as was sugar. His diet was enough to give a cardiologist a heart attack; yet clearly, even in his nineties, it suited him well and he thrived upon it. Large pans of milky coffee would be brewed and then be continually warmed for consumption over the next couple of days.

After his wife Norah died, Reg's eating became a matter of concern. Often, he would work around the clock and forgot all about meals, so absorbed was he by his studies – particularly if they involved mathematical analysis, a subject that he found especially interesting. The effects began to show to those who knew him well. Attempts to keep the fridge stocked involved removing last week's fish dinner (half eaten but being saved), overripe cheese and various attempts by his daughter Marina to leave him pies and stews that had only to be heated up to provide an excellent meal.

## Honors

His home at Higher Downs was filled with numerous plaques, mementos, awards, scrolls, and other acknowledgements from grateful individuals and organizations – from Hong Kong to Katmandu, and from the Arctic Circle to Australia. Some gifts were carved from wood, stone and marble.

Clutterbuck and Crainer (1990) wrote *Makers of Management: Men and women who changed the business world*, a book about the 24 people living and dead who have contributed most to modern management. Revans was included, alongside Henry Ford, his friend Schumacher and others. Revans was described by Igor Ansoff in the book as "an amazing and underestimated man".<sup>19</sup> In 1997, Revans was granted

the Freedom of the City of London (similar to what some cities grant as the "keys to the city"), allowing him to drive sheep across the Westminster bridge.

### **A few indicative attributes**

There is no attempt here to portray any definitive list, or to say what might have been more important influences than others. It does allow us to catch a glimpse of a man who became so dear to so many.

*Humility:* His own example of the willingness to learn – to read from and listen to others. When evaluating a management issue, he would characteristically talk to the workers first and learn first hand of their challenges – as he did when he went down into the mines with the miners for several months to experience life at the coalface.

*Resolve:* He was extremely successful as a solo athlete. For over 60 years he educated people in action learning, and undertook innovative experiments that were well ahead of their time, and in the face of frequent ridicule and rejection by traditional academics.

*Integrity:* He never claimed to have invented action learning, but simply refers us to evidence of this approach/philosophy/behavioral trait as developed elsewhere in various cultures and civilizations.

*Awareness:* Social cognizance – he was always the champion of the underdog – a passionate believer in participation, and a man who had real respect for those engaged with soiled hands in the real "here-and-now".

*Sensitivity:* He was early influenced by the sight of seamen in bare feet coming to his childhood home during the investigation of the *Titanic* disaster by his father. He never forgot this, and always was sensitive to the plight of the common man. He did not behave as an aristocrat.

*Compassion:* Revans knew the tragedy of two world wars, and had seen the impact first hand in directing emergency services for the East End of London during the World War II Blitz.

*Patience:* He was patient with those who were slower than others in understanding concepts. He was not pedantic.

*Impatience:* He had no patience with those who were exploiting their fellow human beings.

*Assiduity:* He was a master teacher. Few have found anyone else so prepared to listen to their problems and difficulties. He allowed people time to find answers for themselves.

*Concern:* Revans' deep humanitarian concerns were evidenced not only by deeds in his life, but also by his words. How many would have given up their love of physics because of concern that the science was turning to development of weapons of mass destruction? Revans did this readily and never looked back.

## **Last days**

A few days before Christmas, 2001, Revans was moved to Westlands Care in Wem where he could receive greater support as the frailty of his years began to show. After his 95th birthday on May 14, 2002, some friends from the U.K. and Germany gathered with him for lunch in a local pub. Six professors, with masters and doctoral students too, found Reg his usual attentive self. He was quiet and thoughtful, and still showed all the powers of mental assimilation we had always known. He reflected on the conversations and then made his typically lucid, pertinent and deeply insightful contribution.

Over the summer he eagerly monitored events, especially in Romania, wanting to know of the people, their aspirations and their interest in Action Learning. Professors Barker, Botham, and Morris continued to visit him. He posed problems for further consideration, such as "What is the role of the university?" and "What is knowledge?" Just as "Gamma" had been a major study area with Albert Barker only a few years earlier, so too, in the autumn of 2002, Reg and Albert resolved to use the winter months to think about action learning as a cybernetic process in relation to cybernetics in the widest context – physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual, to study these alongside genetics and the quantum physics first unfolding in his youth and developing since (remembering that Reg himself was a physicist), and to explore the whole cybernetic process as an inherent element in Creation itself.

In November, we began to detect tiredness, and Reg's physical condition deteriorated towards the end of the year. He slept a lot over Christmas and New Year, finally succumbing to the eternal rest he so deserved during the evening of January 8, 2003.

## **Notes**

1. Recollections in the family vary and the house no longer exists.
2. As recalled by Revans on various occasions, including London, July 16, 1998.
3. As recalled by Revans on various occasions, including London, July 16, 1998; and Revans 1994 video at Virginia Commonwealth University during his time there as Distinguished Visiting Scholar.

4. Ferdinand Terroux went on to become a Professor in Physics at McGill University.
5. Attributed to Einstein in the *New Statesman*, April 16, 1965.
6. Revans, R. W. (1982) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* (Bromley: Chartwell-Bratt), pp. 23–9.
7. Revans, recollection of conversation, summer 1995, passing through Dagenham by car en route to Cambridge.
8. Revans, in conversation, but also reflecting the thoughts of Piaget; see Revans (1982) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, pp. 772–86.
9. The numbers are from Kynaston, David (2008) *A World to Build: Austerity Britain, 1945–48* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 185. On the report, see an excerpt in Revans (1982) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, pp. 30–1.
10. Revans, R. W. (1980) *Action Learning: New techniques for management* (London: Blond & Briggs), pp. 103–4, 106, 108.
11. Revans, R. W. (1980) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, p. 210.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 226–7.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
15. Revans, R. W. (1980) *Action Learning: New techniques for management*, pp. 39–48.
16. Revans, R. W. (1988) *The Golden Jubilee of Action Learning* (Manchester: Manchester Action Learning Exchange).
17. Revans, R. W. (1980) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, pp. 329–48.
18. These are favorite comments – frequently heard by associates at the Revans Centre and elsewhere.
19. Cited in Clutterbuck, David and Crainer, Stuart (1990) *Makers of Management: Men and women who changed the business world* (London: Guild Publishing), p. 127.