

Christian Munger

*Karl John becomes a
manager*



Don't worry, God is responsible

Translated from German

by

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Foreword

Karl is 85 years old; from his memory, pictures of the past appear. Here you can read first-hand about his life. The memories recorded here contain a wealth of experience. What were Karl's motives? If you want to become a manager, you can look for happiness abroad. Here you can read how it is done. Such a life takes a good deal of courage, knowledge of human nature, a readiness to adapt and a positive attitude towards fellow human beings. It is also important to have a talent for leading oneself and others. In this book, the reader will learn about good management in difficult circumstances.

1. The beginning, shaping character

THE BEGINNING, SHAPING CHARACTER

Karl's father was a technician in a textile dye factory. Shortly before WW2, production was transferred from the Swiss shore of Lake Constance to Germany, where the Wehrmacht needed a plethora of colours for uniforms, vehicles and weapons. About 300 employees lost their jobs in Switzerland. Very few wanted to leave home or go to North Rhine Westphalia. A hard time began on Lake Constance, a period of crisis and disappointment. Some of the younger unemployed were happy to be drafted into the Swiss army, as the border guard against the powerful German Reich was mobilised. Older unemployed people had to look for a new job, including Karl's father. After some time of anxiety and insecurity, he found a job at a cider factory. The canton of Thurgau is known popularly as 'Mostindien'. Apples, pears and other fruits thrive well and are processed in large quantities.

During and after the war, food was scarce and wages were low in Switzerland. The once prosperous economy had come to a standstill, production had to be reduced or even stopped due to lack of labour in many places. Women worked bravely at the workbench and in the yard, but many hands were missing. The light of the fires from the bombing of industrial areas in Friedrichshafen, beyond Lake Constance, and the long guard at the border was a tormenting memory.

For the young Karl, just 14 years old in 1945, the nearby Lake Constance offered great opportunities for all sorts of games and adventures. He was proud to bring fresh fish home to his mother. Fishing was done from the shore or by

boat out on the lake. But what would become of the boy when he left school?



Hunting for food after WW2

In Arbon, about 7 km from Egnach, there was the highly respected Saurer truck factory. With reliable, high quality vehicles and diesel engines, Saurer had earned a good reputation beyond its borders. During the war it delivered to the Swiss army and the Wehrmacht. Many a Saurer truck went through its service in the vastness of the East to the very end. Later, in the economic miracle, they were in use at many civilian transport companies. The trucks from Arbon, with the brand `Berna´ and `Saurer´, achieved a market share of 50% in Switzerland.

Karl had been in the same class as the son of the director Ruprecht. His parents enrolled him at Saurer for an apprenticeship. It had to be something right that could be used later in life. A four-year apprenticeship as a machinist began. At the beginning, precise manual grinding of metals was practised for weeks. Accuracy and stamina were taught,

and a suitably safe and strong hand developed. Welding by different methods and with different metals was also taught. After that, the real teaching began in the production departments. Karl was particularly fascinated by the technology of the diesel engine and the diesel injection pump. Soon, he was transferred to the repairs department, which was a privilege during apprenticeship. After four years at Saurer, Karl was for a while responsible for the transport vehicles at a textile factory.

At that time, young people from German-speaking Switzerland were taken to the French-speaking part of the country for a year, away from their parents. It was mostly a hard time for the young people. In Porrentruy, in the Jura, Karl went to a master baker. At first he felt lonely, but he picked himself up and went out to meet people. He learned to adapt to the new circumstances. He used a bicycle to deliver baked goods in the city and tipping was a welcome addition to the tight financial conditions. At peak times, on weekends and holidays, he volunteered early in the bakery at 4 am. He also attended French language lessons, which brought him great benefits later in life.

At the age of 19, he moved to the army recruiting school – naturally in a unit for engine mechanics. After the drills for military discipline, he joined a unit with heavy motorcars. North-eastern Switzerland is blessed with a military-friendly population – almost every second house in the villages is used. At the farms, there is certainly first a schnapps (usually ‘Träsch’: a condensate of apple and pear). The farmers are allowed to distil one litre per cow tax-free.

Karl completed his time in the army with a transport unit. At that time, the real cavalry (riding troops) was converted from horses to ATVs. The units, which consisted primarily of peasants’ sons, had to leave their horses at home, followed by retraining on off-road vehicles. Karl remembers how he

had to stand in front of the new 'motor-riders' to explain the new vehicle technology. Courage and a certain showmanship were necessary. The character of the young man was shaped: the ability to convince and a confident presentation.

At the end of an instruction period in the military, his uncle offered him an internship for diesel engines at Mercedes Benz in Stuttgart-Sindelfingen. He was trained as a specialist in diesel engines and injection pumps.

With a German diploma, it was not easy to find a job after the war in Switzerland. Diesel specialists with domestic training and experience had the advantage. Karl kept searching. One day he saw an advertisement in *Handelsman Zentralblatt*: Societe de l'Afrique d'Ouest (SCAO) was looking for a specialist for its vehicle operations in West Africa.

Karl sent off his application with CV, in French of course. Soon after came the answer from Paris: an invitation for a job interview, including train ticket and hotel voucher. They wanted to do psychological and practical tests.

He travelled to Paris via Basel by train. On foot, with the help of a city map, he found his hotel. Paris had no luxuries after the war, and the accommodation was basic. In addition, in the same hotel were 20 young French men, who had all applied for the same place. Karl was close to giving up, but again he pulled himself together and faced up to the competition.

The next day, the candidates were welcomed by SCAO. First, everyone had to complete a complicated test form, intensive discussions followed. The applicants were also tested practically. Karl was able to demonstrate his specialist knowledge, with an explanation of the functions of the diesel injection pump. In addition to French, he also spoke English, which he had learned at secondary school in

Egnach. The language skills were ultimately to his decisive advantage, since the SCAO had branches in French West Africa and an office in English-speaking Nigeria.

After a month of anxious waiting, Karl, back home in Egnach, received a written undertaking. He had to travel to Lagos, Nigeria, and get in touch with SCAO: "We need you in Nigeria." So, on to Africa!

But first to the headquarters in Paris, where he introduced himself to the company – an opportunity to build a pleasant relationship in advance with the relevant people at the headquarters. Then off with Air France from Paris to Lagos. The flight in a Constellation propeller aircraft took 14 hours, with stop-overs in Lyon and Tunis.

2. Nigeria, bite through

NIGERIA, BITE THROUGH

“Don´t worry, God is responsible”

This philosophical attitude makes life easier for Africans – exhausting heat, poverty and difficult hygienic and sanitary conditions are better tolerated. Not only did the Islamic tribes in northern Nigeria have the same lifestyle, but also the various, partly Christian tribes in the south of the country. Karl liked that, but he could not and did not want to indulge himself completely in this attitude. His education and training would not allow this.

At Lagos airport, Hansi Leibundgut, also a Swiss, was waiting for him. He was the head of SCAO in Nigeria and the headquarters in Paris had told him about a new Superman who was arriving. Karl was uncertain for the time being, everything was new and he felt lost. He expected an introduction to the company after arrival. But on the first day, a group of 20 Africans were assigned to him to carry out repairs and maintenance on customers' cars. The customers were almost exclusively 'expats' (temporarily resident foreigners). Few Africans were financially able to buy a car during this time. Karl adapted and quickly established good relations with the workers. He still has good memories of this time. He was called the new 'Engineer'. Soon he was accepted by the people and time flew by.

In 1954, after Karl had settled in, become accustomed to the life and had a good relationship with the Africans, a new order arrived from the Paris headquarters: transfer to Apapa, about 100 km north of Lagos. The head of the workshop there, a Frenchman, had been dismissed as he

had hired people who had stolen parts. SCAO assembled trucks for the British brand Austin. Still a greenhorn, Karl now had to take over a plant department with 120 workers. He became head of production with the title of 'Master Engineer'. From the beginning, he felt that the employees were well educated, with a positive attitude. They came from various provinces of Nigeria; there were natives of the Ibo tribes (Catholic, Irish missionaries), the Yoruba (Protestant, Basler missionaries) the Hausas (Muslim) and a few other tribes. Outside in the jungle, there was often war between the different tribes.

At one of the first plant meetings, Karl told the Africans that they no longer needed to address him as 'master' (which was common in the British colonies then), that he had a name like everyone else. Soon he was accepted as a supervisor and felt that his control work was understood.

Every week, six trucks and three small vans had to be assembled. The parts came in wooden boxes from England, were unpacked and assembled. The UK was a major industrial power and Nigeria belonged to the British Empire. The British had tried to give structure and administrative order to the various ethnic groups. The order was upheld by chiefs, magicians, the police and a small army of Africans. This was not bad; the stability and certainty attracted investors and allowed a cautious economic development. Prosperity rose slowly. Some risk-taking businessmen came into the country. European adventurers and the well-educated upper classes in England tried to do business with the raw materials and forest wood.

The new companies knew that young and skilled Nigerians would later take on managerial posts in the factories. Training and preparation for higher positions was important to the country. With much consideration for the local conditions, they devoted themselves to this task. It was a