

Susi in the Sky with Diamonds – The First Woman to Take LSD

By Susanne G. Seiler

In the realm of scientific observation, luck is granted only to those who are prepared.

Albert Hofmann

Picture yourself in a boat on the meandering Rhine as it passes through Basel, most liberal of Swiss cities, a town known for its close ties with pharmaceuticals and banking as well as for a long humanistic tradition manifesting itself in a lively cultivation of the arts, sciences and sports by an enthusiastic population.

Just outside of this lovely medieval city, in one of its the lush green suburbs, we find the home of an elder from a prominent Swiss family, Susi(e) W., born in 1922, two brothers, the father in optometry, ancestors in pharmacy and photography. At age eighty-four, she speaks with a lively, clear and distinguished voice when she phones me in answer to a letter I sent her wishing to know if she's the one: the first woman to have taken LSD. Yes, she says, it's me. I am the Susi you are looking for.

She grew up in the inner city where the houses stand close together and neighborly ties are strong to this day. Susi was a good student, and if she wasn't sent to college it was because girls – were – expected to marry early in those days. Instead, at age seventeen, after a year in French Switzerland where she was taught housekeeping, languages and manners, the young woman took up her training as a chemical laboratory assistant in the Pharmaceutical-Chemical Research Department of Sandoz Laboratories, in a building that has long ceased to exist.

Some sixty years later, Sandoz fused with the chemical companies Ciba and Geigy to become the pharmaceutical giant Novartis. This company has 73 apprentices in their Chemistry Department this year (2011), 43 percent of them women. This relation has not varied significantly over the last ten years. In the nineteen forties, however, things were quite different, young Susi started her three year apprenticeship with Sandoz Chemical Laboratories as the only female. She was only twenty when she obtained her brief or license to handle chemicals and began her work as a Junior Assistant to Dr. Albert Hofmann, a talented chemist then in his late thirties.

At the time when Susi took up her job analyzing samples and concocting mixtures, Albert Hofmann had already developed LSD-25, an organic derivative of the rye fungus *Claviceps purpurea*. Since animal tests conducted in 1938, the year of its creation, had only revealed that rats under the influence of this new substance grew somewhat restless, Hofmann had shelved it as being of no further interest. It was only in 1943, when cleaning up and accidentally getting some of the tincture on his fingers, that it produced an effect making him want to try more.

The notion of self-ingestion may seem farfetched to a present day chemist. New drugs, designed to trigger highly precise responses in the body, undergo an approval cycle of ten years and more, involving hundreds of volunteer subjects in various countries and on all continents, in a triple blind process of

trial and error, meaning not even the doctor administering the drug knows which samples are «loaded» and which mere placebos. Thus, few researchers would think of trying new drugs on themselves, unless they happened to be sufferers of the disease they aimed to cure. However, self-ingestion is a procedure with a long and respectable tradition reaching back to antiquity and the foundations of modern medicine.

The effects perceived by Hofmann after touching some of the vial's contents were a kind of dissociated giddiness, as well as a sense of pleasant expectation, culminating in an experience similar to what he had witnessed in childhood when he saw a particular spot in nature on a hill near his parental home in Baden bristle with light and meaning, a peak experience he had several times as a young boy and much longed to renew. The rest is history; Susi W.'s contribution being a vital footnote.

In Hofmann's well known book, *LSD My Sorrow Child*, we learn that the scientist was taken home by an assistant on Monday 16 April 1943 in the late afternoon, and what this person did for him when he was not feeling well due to the unexpectedly strong effects of the 250 micrograms of LSD-25 he had ingested, believing it to be but a tiny dose. This assistant was Susi, and she had a hard time of it since Dr. Hofmann was hardly fit to ride his bicycle, and she had to coach him along as well as manage her own mount.

It has been written that it was as well for his own safety and for the pedestrians out in the street that day that he had no gasoline for his car. However, Dr. Hofmann didn't own a car at the time and regularly cycled to work, unless he took the streetcar. Under the influence of LSD, the tram did not seem an option, and since it was during the height of war; there were no taxis to be found. And civilians couldn't drive their cars anyway. The available gasoline was used up by the army.

Susi held her boss in high regard and did not want to let him go home unaccompanied, thus she rode along with him, a journey of about five kilometers. Hofmann's wife, Anita, had gone to visit her parents in Lucerne, taking along the two children the couple had at the time (later four). When Susi and the patient arrived at Hofmann's home, the latter was in a bad way, fearing he was about to die. Susi called the son of Professor Stoll, Hofmann's superior, an M.D., to come to her supervisor's assistance, and she called Anita Hofmann who had gone out but called back later. The doctor couldn't find anything wrong with his patient other than his hugely dilated pupils, but he stayed on to observe him. Mrs. Hofmann came home around seven and took charge. When Susi went home, Dr. Hofmann was feeling a lot better. In fact he was enjoying himself.

Everybody in the Hofmann team tried LSD at least once; Susi tried it a total of three times. She took her first trip at age twenty-two, on 12 June 1943. Thus she was not only the first woman but, most remarkably, also the youngest person ever to experiment with this powerful substance, although the dosage had been lowered to 100 μ g, a party dose by today's standards. The effects she perceived were mild and pleasant, she had beautiful visions, the world around her took on a luminous quality; it was, in her own words, »a good experience«. Alerted by her superior's cycling adventure, she chose to take the streetcar home. In those days, a conductor came to one's seat to sell the ticket. To Susi, he seemed to have a rather large nose. Other people on the

tram looked funny too. Susi was young and liked to laugh, but she wasn't confused or destabilized and had no trouble finding her way home. She repeated the experiment twice to help established secure parameters for the medical use of LSD. It was held that a moderate dose of 100 micrograms produced a mild euphoria and an exuberant kind of self-confidence conducive to psychiatric inquiry. That acid should hit the streets and go mainstream one day wasn't even remotely considered.

Set and setting were not buzzwords in those days. What was the programming Susi and her young and open mind underwent? What were her mood and her expectations? The setting of the first part of the experiments was scientific, taking place at the lab. Time was recorded, notes were kept. Susi was eager to contribute to the advance of science and to help determine the usefulness of LSD. As Dr Hofmann says: «LSD finds such an application in medicine, by helping patients in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to perceive their problems in their true significance.» (1)

His lab assistant had also witnessed Hofmann's reactions to his «overdose», seeing him both in sorrow as well as quite content. Following the traditional wisdom of Paracelsus, the adverse or undesired effects that her boss had experienced had to lie in the dosage. It's just that no one wanted to believe that the chemist had only ingested such a minute quantity. This was soon confirmed by Prof. Stoll himself. It was also true that a reduction of the dose made the effects of LSD-25 more predictable. By the time of its prohibition in the USA, in 1967, hundreds of psychologists and psychiatrists worldwide had to give up promising psychedelic research to follow the paranoid injunction of the Nixon administration: Thou shalt not know!

But these events came to pass much later and did not affect Susi who, one year after her last experiment, left Sandoz and got married.

Epilogue

I did not only get a phone from Susie W. about this matter. Imagine my surprise when I picked up the phone one early evening and heard the voice of Albert Hofmann whom I had met and written about on several occasions. How are you, Mrs. Seiler, he asked me? (I had always had too much respect and admiration for him to call him Albert and had remained on formal terms.) And how are your children? he wanted to know next. I was totally blown over that the old man should not only remember me but my family as well! We hadn't been in contact for 15 years. And this for a hundred-year-old! I felt so happy and privileged that I walked on clouds for days.

Dr. Hofmann confirmed what I have written above. Susi W. passed away shortly before her former boss, in the fall of 2011.

(1) Foreword to LSD My Problem Child (www.psychedelic-library.org/childf.htm)