

BERND MAGNUS EULOGY

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Bernd Magnus was a brilliant philosopher, acclaimed internationally for his work on German philosophy, specifically for his studies of Heidegger and Nietzsche. He claimed that his interest in philosophy stemmed from his desire, at the age of 12, to debate his Catholic friend on the merits of Thomas Aquinas. I suspect, however, that what really drove him to plumb the depths of the German philosophical mind was a very different, and much more traumatic experience in his childhood. Bernd was a child survivor of the Holocaust, having spent a year and a half in the concentration camp of Bergen Belsen beginning at the age of 4 and a half.

The rest of the war he spent in hiding and on the run with his mother and his sister. He writes about the unique experience of children during these years:

“Those of us who were infants, toddlers, or very young children were of no use in the camps. We could not serve as a labor force as many of our parents and older siblings could be forced to do. We needed food to survive even at a starvation level. We were a drain on scarce resources.

Most of all, however, we were a constant distraction to our families, a reminder of a lost "normal" life, a danger that constantly threatened to rehumanize inmates. Our very presence threatened to once again make human and humane the stark, brutal, and systematic dehumanization of camp victims. That dehumanization, after all, was one of the principal objectives of concentration camps.

Extinguish a person's human attachments and projects, all of them, and make humiliation routine to the point that it is no longer experienced as violation, and all that is left is a living ghost.

Most adult inmates were dead within, naked and empty shells, even while still walking.

In the typical case, therefore, we the children of the Holocaust were the first to be killed. Even before the ovens were built in the camps that had crematoria, children were already perceived as a potential menace to Germany's Final Solution to the Jewish Question.

At the very least we were perceived as a potentially subversive force in the process of dehumanization.

That is why there are so few of my peers left alive today.

We were used for target practice in some camps.

We were rounded up, massacred, and buried anonymously in mass graves in others. Occasionally, infants were thrown out of infirmary windows to see if the camp guards could spear them on the bayonets attached to the guards' rifles. In the camps that had the earliest fully operational gas chambers and crematoria, we were among the first to be incinerated. Still others died of starvation.”

For Bernie Magnus, as well as for the other children, this horror was the only reality they knew as children.

They had no sweet memories of a normal household, or of a childhood filled with fun and games.

Bernie writes:

“Adults and adolescents were able to experience the horror against the backdrop of what they had experienced as a "normal" life. We, on the other hand, were not- since we had no way to distinguish between a normal life and crimes against humanity. Indeed, for those of us of a certain age, crimes against humanity were just normal life...”

we could not distinguish a normal life from the Shoah in the sense that there was no contrast available to us between life and the Shoah. For those in my age cohort, life and the Shoah meant quite literally the same thing for the children of the Holocaust.”

So his specializing in German philosophy was Bernie’s effort to try and understand the mentality of a society that was so advanced in terms of arts, letters, culture, and science, yet capable of the most intentionally cruel crime against humanity.

A student of Hannah Arendt, he concluded that it was not specifically the German character that was responsible for the Shoah but, rather, and to his dismay, the banal quality of evil that we are all capable of.

Quoting philosopher Stanley Cavell, he says:

“someday, if there is a someday, we will have to learn that evil thinks of itself as good, that it could not have made such progress in the world unless people planned and performed it in all conscience.”

Bernd Magnus was born on December 28th, 1937 in Danzig, Gdansk today, two years after the infamous Nuremberg laws were passed.

His father was Orthodox and his mother converted to Judaism.

Bernie writes:

“My mother and father were married July 30, 1929, over the predictably strenuous objections of my father's family. This will come as no surprise to many of you because, as you may know, converts to Judaism are still too often regarded as Jews by proxy or by courtesy (at best) and as non-Jews by many otherwise enlightened Jews even today. Unfortunately, the Nazis did not attend to such subtleties. They seldom made such distinctions.”

His father, Walter, was an international leather expert who did a lot of traveling for his work. Because of his expertise, with the help of Bernie's mother, his company was able to send him from Germany to the United States in 1938. There he remained during the war.

He planned to send for his wife and children but was unable to.

At the age of 4 and a half, Bernd, his mother and sister were sent to the Bergen Belsen concentration camp.

They escaped a year and a half later when, as they were being transferred to Auschwitz, their train was bombed by the Americans.

They were hidden by non-Jews, including Bernie's brother Heinz's fiancée, Hilla, a non-Jew and, incredibly enough, by an SS Colonel, who hid the children in his basement while Bernie's mother worked as his housekeeper.

They were constantly hungry and in fear of being discovered.

Bernie had to witness such horrors as:

“an illiterate Polish family of four living outside Gedienia who had hidden us and, when discovered, were forced back into their farmhouse at gunpoint while the house and its inhabitants were set ablaze. I had to witness this against the black evening sky from a crawlspace high above the town's school attic, while my mother held her hand over my mouth to stifle my scream to the point of asphyxiation.”

After the war, the Red Cross listed Bernie's father as deceased, as well as his mother, his sister, and himself. But people knew the Red Cross made mistakes, so the family did not give up hope that they would find each other again. Amazingly, they did find each other.

One day, Bernie's mother Elisabeth was out shopping for food.

It began to rain and a kindly woman invited her inside her home.

The woman's daughter was preparing to leave for America

with her new G.I. husband. Elisabeth asked her to bring a letter to Walter—

of course she had no address and assumed, in Bernie's words,

that America was a shtetl where everyone knew everyone else.

Nonetheless, when the young bride and groom arrived in New York and

settled into an apartment, they noticed that the mailbox downstairs

had the name Walter Magnus on it. She knocked on the door and,

sure enough, it was Bernie's father.

Eight months later, reunited, the Magnus family moved to the West Side of New York, joining RamaTorah Synagogue.

Bernie attended public school for Elementary and Junior High, then Music and Art for High School. He had a beautiful singing voice, performing at the Blue Angel night club and the Met in high school. He also learned to play the violin, as he needed two musical talents to enroll.

Bernie proved to be of superior intelligence right away. In elementary school, he once got lost but knew his address so managed to get a cab driver to take him home. He also had lunch at home every day following dismissal by his teacher. One day, the teacher apparently dismissed them via a different way. But Bernie was not fooled.

He found his way home anyway. Upon his return, he was surprised to see his friends getting ready to go to lunch. "Lunch?" he asked the teacher perplexed. "Yes," she replied. But Bernie hadn't they already been released for lunch? "That was a fire drill," the teacher explained – not lunch dismissal.

Bernie attended the City College of New York and Columbia University for Graduate school. His mother could not figure out what he was going to do to make a living with a degree in philosophy. "Teach," he told her, and that seemed to satisfy her concern that Bernie would find gainful employment.

During graduate school Bernie taught at Fairleigh Dickinson University to support his wife and two children. Upon graduation, he got a post at the University of Akron where he remained for 3 years, until he came to UCR where he taught for 36 years and where, 5 years ago, the Philosophy Department named a lecture for him. Bernie was not only a professor of philosophy, but also, a Professor of Humanities, the only one to hold that title at UCR. He also served as associate dean for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. In 1984, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. And he founded the Center for Ideas and Society on campus. He was a beloved, charismatic teacher, who remained in touch with many of his students throughout the years. His classes were often filled to overflowing. One of his students, who had taken his Introduction to Philosophy and his Existentialism courses, met him again after she was no longer his student and married him. Lore joined Bernd and other graduate students at Frank's, a local bar. He offered to take her home, and they were together ever since. Lore says she fell in love with Bernie right away – he swept her off her feet. One of the things that endeared her to him was that he did the dishes when he came over to have dinner with her and her roommates. They were married in August of 1972. Lore and Bernd had a very exciting and stimulating life together.

They traveled extensively: to Jamaica, Israel and Europe.

Because Bernd was the chair of his department, they entertained a lot.

The house was always filled with interesting friends and colleagues.

They attended theater, concerts, movies and opera together – and, of course, baseball. Bernd was an avid Angels fan so they had season tickets to the ball games.

Aside from his intellectual interests, Bernd was also quite an athlete, a good tennis player, a runner, a baseball player in an intra-mural league, and a basketball player with a good outside shot.

Bernd was also a big dog lover. Growing up, he had a Doberman beagle mix named Princess, and later a variety of dogs: a fox terrier Chihuahua, a sheltie, a collie, and a Golden Retriever, in addition to a beloved cat.

He was a very generous person supporting a number of charities: the ASPCA, The Humane Society, and Childreach International which provided Lore and Bernd with a foster child in Africa. When he was younger, he would even give his coats away to homeless people. He was a member of the ACLU, the Democratic National Committee, and a very proud supporter of President Obama.

He was a very considerate husband, bringing Lore flowers regularly, taking her to dinner often, and buying her lots of jewelry.

Bernd overcame the tragedy of his young life in the Holocaust, becoming a distinguished and highly respected professor.

But his illness, ulcerative colitis, ultimately defeated him.

He was unable to adjust to his ileostomy. He tried -- but gradually, had trouble leaving the house or being engaged with people.

It was a tragic end to a man who had accomplished so much in the face of incredible odds. But to the very end, he retained his charm and his wonderful sense of humor.

Ultimately, the impact of the Holocaust was never far from Bernd's mind.

Following is a dream he recounts in an essay:

"I truly want nothing more fervently than to believe in God, His justice, and His mercy. Occasionally, on those very rare moments of total prolonged silence and solitude when I am in the mountains among 250 year old Jeffrey pines above Big Bear Lake, on nights when I can look with the naked eye directly into the silent heart of our galaxy, then, just occasionally, I feel God's presence.

It has the feel of a warm light that surrounds and envelopes me, a light that appears to be trying to become a determinate shape.

Just then, as I feel on the threshold of contact with the Divine, a sudden odor makes its presence felt; at first almost imperceptibly, then increasing in an intensity that seems to be directly proportional to the light's struggle to become a determinate shape.

The odor is very much like that of a brush fire during a Santa Ana wind in Southern California, except that it is more acrid and cloyingly sweet. Slowly, the odor is transformed into its origins, smoke, which envelopes and dims the light. The smoke now looks like tiny black and white snowflakes, with occasional burning cinders that appear and extinguish their light much as fireflies do. As the smoke and odor intensify, I realize that they are the cinders and smoke from the smoke stacks of several crematoria. The smoke and cinders of the now-burned and burning corpses overwhelm the light, its attempt to make God a living presence to me. Finally, the burning cinders extinguish the light itself.”

The cinders did not extinguish Bernie’s light.

We pray that Bernie is now at peace.