



Eulogy for Leonard H. Ehrlich

Carl S. Ehrlich

York University, Toronto, Canada

ehrich@yorku.ca

My father was born as Leonhard Ehrlich on April 2, 1924, in Vienna, Austria.¹ His parents, Josef and Helene, had moved to the erstwhile capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from what is now southern Poland soon after their marriage at the end of what was then known as the Great War but that we know now as World War I. There they managed to establish a comfortable middle-class existence for their two children, Leonhard and his older sister Leonore (known in their youth by their nicknames Harry and Lola), in what was then the city with the highest Jewish population in Western Europe.

It was a turbulent time, with various political parties with radical agendas from across the political spectrum vying for power, oftentimes leading to assassination and armed struggle. Indeed, my father witnessed the quelling of one of these insurrections, when the Austrian army shelled the imposing Karl-Marx-Hof, putting down a socialist uprising in February 1934. He also experienced the rise of fascism and its concomitant anti-Semitism and the events leading up to the *Anschluss* or incorporation of Austria as a province of Nazi Germany in March 1938. As life

for Jews became increasingly restricted and dangerous, the Jews of Vienna, including Harry's family, tried to escape. His sister was the first to get out, on a children's transport to England. Harry himself was preparing to try to immigrate illegally to Palestine with his Zionist youth group, when his parents finally received the coveted affidavit allowing them to immigrate to the United States *two months after the beginning of World War II*. By then he had borne personal witness—among many other dreadful sights—to *Reichspogromnacht* (aka *Kristallnacht* or the Night of Broken Glass), to the sight of his father being forced to clean the streets with a toothbrush, and to that of Hitler marching in triumph through Vienna on the first anniversary of the *Anschluss*. My father was a non-violent yet exceedingly brave man, who as a front-line medic in the American army did not carry a weapon, not even for self-defense. Nonetheless, he wished that he had had a weapon in his hands on the day he saw Hitler in March 1939.

These formative years in Vienna were important for many reasons, but one reason stands out among all others. Even though he was always bright and had an extremely inquisitive mind, it was not always applied to what he was supposed to be doing in school, where he had a reputation as the leading cut-up. Thus it happened that he failed sixth grade and had to stay back a year. In retrospect, this was the best thing that ever happened to him, for this is how he ended up in my mother Edith's class. Somehow my mother, the best

¹ This is a slightly longer version of a eulogy held on the occasion of Leonard H. Ehrlich's funeral, four days after his death on June 8, 2011. Henceforth, his name will be abbreviated as LHE in the footnotes.

pupil in the class, and my father, the worst-behaved, got to know one another and the rest—as they say—is history. They have been inseparable ever since.

Before my mother was able to escape Vienna for England (like my aunt on a children's transport or *Kindertransport*), she and my father spent as much time together as possible, not knowing whether they would ever see one another again. Yet, two months after my father and his parents landed in New York, he was at the docks to welcome my mother's parents to freedom in the new world. However, by the time my mother had managed to join her parents, my father—now known as Leonard H. Ehrlich²—and his family had moved to Chicago. Nonetheless, when my father was drafted into the army, my mother jumped on a bus for the long ride to Salina, Kansas, to marry my father, with only a rabbi and two arbitrarily grabbed soldiers as witnesses to the event. It was May 24, 1944, and my parents wanted to have at least a couple of weeks together before my father left for an uncertain future as a frontline medic in the European theatre of war. When my mother arrived at the camp for the wedding, the guards at the entrance to the camp, apprised of the arrival of a war-bride, called out, "You'll be sorry!" They never were, not for an instant.

My parents have had a marriage that most people can only dream of. United by a deep and abiding love and a complete melding of their beings and essences, they have truly "become one flesh" in the words of Genesis (2:24). My father certainly would have agreed with the thought expressed near the end of Schiller's *An die Freude* ("Ode to Joy") and set to music by Beethoven in both his 9th Symphony and his opera *Fidelio: Wer ein holdes Weib errungen, stimm in unserem Jubel ein* ("whoever has found a fair wife, join in our rejoicing"). And indeed, another quote from that same poem is inscribed in my parents' wedding rings: *schöner Götterfunken* ("beautiful divine spark").

The depth of their attachment to one another hit home for me when my parents were separated for three weeks in the late summer of 1973, one of the few times they were apart since my father's return from the war. My father had been appointed to the annual directorship of U.Mass.'s exchange program at the University of Freiburg in Germany. And my mother,

sister, and maternal grandmother had left before my father and I, both of whom had to complete our respective summer school sessions, he as an instructor, I as a student. Three weeks later, the two of us landed in Genoa, Italy, after a ten-day voyage that had taken us to Lisbon, Mallorca, and Naples. Although our plan was to drive to Freiburg over the course of two days, my father was so eager to see my mother that he drove all night, through Italy and Switzerland, over the Alps and up the Rhine Valley into Germany, in order to arrive in Freiburg as dawn was breaking.

My wife Michal, who has attended and officiated at many funerals, informs me that the word "hero" is one of the most overused words in eulogies. Of course, everyone is a hero to his or her loved ones. And yet, my father was a certified hero. A man of self-effacing modesty and bravery, he was awarded both a Purple Heart for being wounded and a Silver Star for bravery in action, quite a feat for a non-combatant. Indeed, he was recommended for a second Silver Star, which he turned down because he had already won one, something for which my mother never forgave him, since the points that would have accrued to him on its account would have brought him home from the war a month earlier.

Following a few years of hard work, my parents went to pursue graduate studies in Psychology in Basel, Switzerland, returning to Europe in part to see whether any members of their extended families had survived. Unfortunately, the survivors were few and far between.³ Be that as it may, as part of their program, my parents were required to take a course in Philosophy. It was to prove a life-changing experience, as they became disciples of philosopher Karl Jaspers, after whom I may or may not be named—my father was always coy about answering this question— and to whose philosophy my father in particular was to dedicate his scholarly career. Like his teacher, my father combined a sharp intellectual and personal honesty with a deep moral sense that in both cases is their greatest legacy: profoundly ethical and honest human beings, whose lives provided sterling examples of how to live and interact with one's fellows. Both Jaspers and my father shared an innate curiosity about what it means to be human; hence, they were people to whom the saying derived from Terence *nihil humanum mihi*

² LHE anglicized his name by removing the "h" from Leonhard and making it his middle initial in honor of his childhood nickname.

³ LHE estimated that he lost between 60 and 80 uncles, aunts, and first cousins.

alienum est ("nothing human is foreign to me") truly applies. And both Jaspers and my father were privileged and lucky to spend their lives with their soul-mates, their *bashertes* (as they say in Yiddish).

Once their meager funds had run out, my parents returned to the States, where a connection established through Jaspers led to their enrolment at Yale University, from which my father received his PhD in 1960. Four years previously (and just after my birth), he had accepted a position in the Philosophy Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. My parents jumped at the chance to move to New England, which reminded them of the forested terrain in Central Europe that had once been home to them and to which they returned innumerable times over the course of the years. Indeed, my father was to spend the whole of his academic career—except for the occasional guest-professorship—at U.Mass., not only teaching courses in Continental Philosophy but also as the founder and long-time director of the Judaic Studies Program (now the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies). Over the course of his thirty-five years at U.Mass., my parents raised their family, consisting of my sister Karin and me, my maternal grandmother as well as a dog and a seemingly infinite number of cats.

My father was a dedicated teacher and respected scholar, authoring and/or editing over a dozen books in both German and English, including his monumental magnum opus, *Choices under the Duress of the Holocaust*, which he coauthored with my mother and whose upcoming publication he unfortunately did not live to see.

In spite of his accomplished intellectual and professional life, there were other things that were as important to him if not more so. My father loved art, music, nature, *Jause* (the Viennese equivalent of afternoon tea), and also his daily glass of ice-cold beer, loves that he attempted to impart to his children—with only varying success in the case of the beer. My father was raised in an orthodox Jewish household. However, the tragedy of the Holocaust occasioned a theological estrangement from Judaism that lasted a number of years. While he never reclaimed his boyhood orthodoxy, he enthusiastically and publically embraced his Judaism: the survival of Judaism, of the Jewish people, of the Jewish state, and of Jewish scholarship belonging to the major factors motivating his life. It is surely no coincidence that among his children and children-in-law are two professors of Jewish studies

and one rabbi (not to mention a medical doctor—one of the most stereotypically Jewish of professions).

However, nothing in my father's life was more important to him than his family. He had come from a large family—his parents alone had six and thirteen siblings respectively—and the loss of most of his relatives during the Holocaust determined his zeal in tracking down and keeping in touch with the scattered remnants of his clan throughout the world. He was a loving yet demanding parent, whose pride in and devotion to his children was extended and transferred to his five grandsons. Indeed, one of my most vivid memories of him is of his holding one of my sons as a baby with a palpable sense and expression of awe and love. At his sister's funeral close to seven years ago, my father spoke of the disappointment—and indeed tragedy—of her not living long enough to experience the birth of at least one great-grandchild. Unfortunately, the same can now be said of him. In this regard I turn to his grandsons Yonah, Yossi, Elie, Shimi, and Natan, to remind you of the legacy you have inherited, and that Opa—as you called him—had three Hebrew names,⁴ which should be more than enough to get you started!

No object embodied his devotion to his family—both past, present, and future—more than a gold watch my father had inherited from his father, who had received it as an engagement present from his future father-in-law close to one hundred years ago. At every family occasion—whether a wedding, a bar mitzvah, or a funeral—my father would take out the watch and build his remarks on an allusion to it and what it represented as an heirloom and one of the last tangible connections to a large and largely lost family, always prefacing his remarks with the words: "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking..."

Presumably anticipating the end, my father wrote the following in the last personal email I received from him on January 27th of this year: "Dear Carl, when you come here in April, it will be high time to hand you THE GOLD WATCH [sic!]. Dad for the Fischgrund⁵-Ehrlich Family." After I saw him for the last time six weeks ago, upon which occasion it was actually my mother who gave me the watch, I wrote to him as follows: "When I visited you this past week, you gave

⁴ LHE's Hebrew name was Aryeh Yehudah Menachem ben (son of) Alter Joseph Chaim ve-Hadassah.

⁵ LHE's mother's maiden name.

me your father's gold watch. I promise I will treasure it always and that it will have a position of honor at all family events at which it will be my privilege to speak (even if I am just as unaccustomed to public speaking as you have always claimed you are!)." I knew then that the first time I would wear this watch would be on this day whose coming I have dreaded for years.⁶

My father was born the year that Giacomo Puccini died. Two years later, Arturo Toscanini led the premiere of Puccini's incomplete last opera *Turandot*. Following the death of Liu in the third act, the music stopped; whereupon Toscanini turned to the audience and said: "At this point, the maestro laid down his pen." Now my father has laid down his pen, like Puccini with his work impressive but incomplete, working on his various scholarly projects until just a couple of months ago.⁷

However, since my father—unlike his father and his son—did not particularly care for the (arguably) over-emotional music of Puccini, let me close my remarks by quoting a section of the final chorus of Johann Sebastian Bach's theologically difficult but musically sublime *St. Mathew Passion*, whose music my parents loved and love so much:

*Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder
Und rufen dir im Grabe zu:
Ruhe sanfte, sanfte ruh.*

We sit down with tears in our eyes
And call to you in the grave:
Rest in peace, peacefully rest.

⁶ On the occasion of his youngest grandson's bar mitzvah in 2003, LHE spoke about his father's gold watch as follows:

The other eight [sisters of LHE's mother whose fiancés received gold watches from their future father-in-law] were murdered, so were their husbands, with few exceptions most of their children, who were my cousins, and their children. Nothing of theirs is left, only names and memories, and of the nine watches [given by my LHE's grandfather to his prospective sons-in-law] only one is left, my father's. My mother gave it to me when I received my doctorate. Over the years I carried it hardly more often than one or two dozen times, at special family occasions, at *brisses*, weddings, golden anniversaries, bar-mitzvahs, and the funerals of my mother and of my niece Judy [and in 2004 of LHE's sister Leonore].

Though precious, a watch is merely a material object. Yet this one is a sign of continuity, not just of the family, but of the heritage that was legated by Shmuel Yehideh [Fischgrund, LHE's maternal grandfather] to the generations to come when he gave the watch to my father.

⁷ In addition to the works currently in press, LHE had a long list of projects left unfinished at his passing.

Yehi zikhro barukh! May his memory be blessed!