

In memoriam

Henrik Birnbaum—Remembering a Great Teacher

(b. December 13, 1925, Breslau/Wrocław; d. April 26, 2002, Los Angeles)

Professor Birnbaum, as I referred to him at the time, entered my consciousness together with the notion of “Slavic” in the fall of 1979, when in Ralph Bunche Hall at UCLA he taught a course in Slavic history and culture. He was a senior Slavic scholar of international renown and I was a college freshman from a beach community near Malibu who had just begun studying Russian. The incongruous setting accentuated the divide between the worlds we inhabited. Southern California with its palm trees, Mediterranean climate, and post-hippie-era faculty could not have been further removed from the Island of Rügen, Novgorod the Great, and the Bogomils, about which, among many other topics, he engagingly narrated. In an era when homegrown (or transplanted) male professors, at least in California, sported polyester shirts, unbuttoned collars, and went “with the flow,” Professor Birnbaum wore a coat and tie and carried himself with the dignity of the eminent European academic that he was. Both through his narrative—written and spoken—and his physical presence he made the Slavic world, past and present, come alive for his students, even in such disorienting circumstances. Take, for example, his 1977 article on the problem of the settlement of the proto-Slovenes, which begins with a stroll through Vienna in the alley named for the Babenberg ruler Heinrich II Jasomirgott, turns then to an extended philological debate on the possible Slavic origin of the name Jasomir(gott), and continues with a cogent discussion of theories on the relationship among the Slavic dialects that were later to become identified as the South Slavic languages and dialects (including, crucially, the relationship between Slovene and Kajkavian). Such an engaging narrative is a typical product of Professor Birnbaum, who with grace and penetrating erudition married facts and material from the past with theory from the present to breathe life into and deepen our understanding of human culture and the achievements of civilization, with the Slavic world at the center.

Henrik, as he asked me to call him towards the end of my doctoral studies, was a fine and dedicated teacher who taught as much through his lectures as by example. During my graduate years, the oral tradition among my cohort held as common wisdom that Eastern European Slavists work was rich in data, which they had at their fingertips, but American Slavists work was rich in ideas. This flawed dichotomy served more to salve the insecurities of embryonic New-World Slavophiles than to reflect more than a facet of reality. Henrik showed us the third way, namely, that one could in the modern world effectively straddle cultures, both mastering source material, abundant in its domestic setting, as well as engage in the fecundity of ideas from wherever they may originate. Accordingly, Henrik drew from all work that had something to say, regardless of its origin. In a field abounding in thinly veiled nationalist sentiments, even (and, often, especially) when engaging in scholarship, Henrik was the virtuous exception, a man unquestionably without prejudice. He so respected and valued other peoples thought that he spent much of his life’s energy synthesizing the panoply of extant approaches, an endeavor that effectively

bridged East and West (let us remember that, at the time, the Cold War considerably hampered the effort). A fine illustration of this is his tour-de-force narrative bibliographies on the reconstruction of Common Slavic (1975a, 1983; Russian translation 1987). These works were received unkindly by some, who claimed that the work was no more than a listing that could be compiled by any reasonably informed student of historical Slavic. Such criticisms could not have been more wrongheaded. Very few Slavists, if any, had Henrik's wide-ranging view of both the philological and theoretical aspects of the Slavic linguistics (as well as antiquities, Indo-European linguistics, etc.), mastery of languages (his "native" languages alone included Polish, German, Swedish and English), personal contact with many of the leading exponents of the field, and, most importantly, the foresight of a visionary who could—I emphasize again: without prejudice—place on par the reconstruction of a "barbarian" proto-language with every bit of the intricacy and plethora of conundrums pertaining to a "classical" language.

Among the many qualities of Henrik's personality to be admired was his seemingly boundless energy. During a typical day at the UCLA Slavic Department one could pass by the door of his Kinsey Hall office and hear the keys of the typewriter clicking along furiously, attend one of Henrik's lectures, and have some time in his office for his counsel. Not the most patient of men, Henrik liked to get things done and rarely put off for tomorrow what could be done today. One spring morning, as we worked on a paper that turned out to be among my first published articles, he decided to call up his colleague, Prof. Peter Rehder, in Munich to ask about placing my paper in a forthcoming issue of *Die Welt der Slaven*. Not finding him in, he dashed off a letter to Prof. Rehder and, to make the story short, by early that summer the galley proofs were already in my hands. No doubt Henrik's days were even busier than I had perceived in those intermittent moments of observation. Henrik's energy helps to explain his extraordinary productivity (nearly 300 bibliographic positions at the time of his 1985 Festschrift and very few of them are brief!) as well as his significant presence in such broad fields as Slavic, Indo-European and general linguistics (both synchronic and diachronic), literary and poetic studies, history, and cultural anthropology. He was at home discussing Church Slavic syntax (e.g., 1958), linguistic theory (e.g., 1975b), comparative literature (e.g., 1976), as well as Yugoslav political and cultural history (e.g., 1980). One of his "hobbies" was the exploration of the Rusin language (e.g., 1981–1983). These few examples only scratch the surface of his work, which was as wide as it was deep. The interested reader can (and should) marvel at his range in his thematic essay collections, including Birnbaum 1981a, 1981b, and 1991.

Henrik possessed warmth, selflessness, and wisdom, characteristics all too frequently lacking in the academic world. For example, it would have been easy and ego-gratifying for him to have assigned a topic for my dissertation—particularly when, in my naiveté, I asked for one. Wisely, he insisted that I search for my own topic, because, he reasoned, the work would then be intrinsically interesting to me. I am grateful for his insistence, which forced me to find my own way and to develop a sense of purpose in the endeavor. When I decided to pursue a topic in Slovene historical dialectology, he supported me fully. During my research phase, while I was a Fulbright Fellow in Slovenia in 1989, he came to visit me at my Ljubljana

apartment, where I had just begun to raise a family. This was very much Henrik, living up to the attribute in the syntagm *Vater Doktor*.

He will be missed, but very well remembered.

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