

## OBITUARY

Martin Ostwald

(1922 – 2010)

I came to Swarthmore College in the fall of 1963 full of ambitions, none of which even remotely involved majoring in Ancient Greek. A number of classical allusions in the books I studied piqued my interest, and a production of Euripides in the Scott Outdoor Auditorium — a production of which I understood precisely one word<sup>1</sup> — convinced me to allocate a single course in the following year to the subject. All I hoped for was the ability to look up untranslated words that occasionally crept into books.

Martin Ostwald needed no more of an opening than that. He taught us from a fifty-year-old textbook<sup>2</sup> ‘because this one uses only real Greek’: modern, ‘made-up’ Greek, he explained to us, could not give us a proper feel for the Greek language. It didn’t hurt that the readings gave us a bit of Menander and a significant amount of Plato, among other treats. But what really charmed us was his infinite patience and the twinkle in his eye when we made a mistake, as if he had just been waiting for the opportunity to explain that point, and we had done him the greatest of favors by botching it. ‘He is,’ I told my friends, ‘the teacher of elementary Greek greater than which nothing can be conceived.’ By the end of the year, when I had to choose a subject of concentration, Greek was an oversize minor. By the time I graduated, it was my major.

I wasn’t the only one. The play I mentioned had been produced and directed by a mathematics major;<sup>3</sup> Menelaus was played by a student who had started in mathematics and physics but moved over to Greek;<sup>4</sup> Orestes was a Greek major<sup>5</sup> who in the following year used original music and dance to mount a production of the *Bacchae* (in Greek, of course) that will never be forgotten by those who participated in it, and probably not by many of those who, like me, merely sat in the audience. Classics was an exciting subject at Swarthmore in the sixties.

The chief excitement was in the seminar room. In a gentle note sent to us from Oxford the previous spring, Mr. Ostwald — in keeping with the Quaker tradition of Swarthmore, our teachers were called simply “Miss”, “Mrs.”, or “Mister” regardless of their degrees and titles — [Ostwald] sent us a list of passages to read so that we would have more time ‘to devote to discussing matters of substance.’ By a carefully selected set of readings and a judicious and up-to-date bibliography, we broke lances in our seminar papers with the greatest scholars of the day on the tyranny of Peisistratus, the Cleisthenean revolution, the Themistocles Decree, Marathon and Salamis, Sphacteria and Amphipolis, Sicily and Decelea. The next year, as a graduate student at Harvard, I heard N.G.L. Hammond deliver the brilliant paper that he would later publish as ‘The Campaign and Battle of Marathon’.<sup>6</sup> I asked him a question from the seminar paper I had written for Mr. Ostwald, and was told that he had wry comments to make about students who came to the lecture

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<sup>1</sup> When Mike Ferber clapped Joe deGrazia on the back and said, “Ὀρέστ’ ” (Eur. *Or.* 682), I understood that he was calling him by his name.

<sup>2</sup> James Turney Allen, *First Year of Greek* (New York, 1917).

<sup>3</sup> Duncan Foley, now Leo Model Professor of Economics at the New School for Social Research; the classmate he married, Helene Peet Foley, majored in English but is now Professor of Classics at Barnard College and, like Martin Ostwald, a former president of the American Philological Association.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ferber, now Professor of English and Humanities at the University of New Hampshire.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Joseph DeGrazia III, who later taught Foreign Languages at Rider University.

<sup>6</sup> *JHS* 88 (1968) 13-57.

so well-prepared that their questions were hard to deal with. The only preparation had been an undergraduate seminar — but it was Martin Ostwald’s seminar. He did not have to draw explicit modern parallels; when Thucydides wrote (1.22.4) that his history would be useful for ὅσοι βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφές σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὐθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, he pointed out to us, ‘he doesn’t promise you answers, but at least when things like this happen again you will recognize them.’ In those Vietnam years we recognized them only too well.

He did not speak about his own past in those years, at least not to me. It was not that he was embarrassed about his background; he did mention that Columbia had given him a job teaching German ‘because they thought it would be easy for me.’ He discovered, however, that a person knows the grammar of his mother tongue much less than he knows the grammar of a language he learned in school. To prove the point to us, he asked us a simple question: some English words have a comparative in –er (bigger, wider, further) and others do not (which is why only Alice in Wonderland says, ‘Curiouser and curiouser’). Is there a rule that tells you which do and which do not? None of us knew until he told us, and I leave the question open for the Anglophone reader.

We knew that he was a German Jew; his English, though impeccable, betrayed his foreign birth, and he never hid his religion. But in those days it would have been considered indelicate to bring up unpleasant memories, and only later did I learn more about his background. The story has been well told elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> but it would not be proper to remember Martin Ostwald without knowing something of what lay behind him. His *Gymnasium* education had been maintained, surprising as it may seem, until 1938, when he was sent at the age of sixteen along with his family to a concentration camp after they naively called the police because their apartment had been wrecked on *Kristallnacht*. His father’s parting words, when he and his brother were released but their parents were not, were from the *Iliad*:

ἔσσεται ἡμαρ ὅτ’ ἄν ποτ’ ὀλώλη Ἴλιος ἰρῆ  
καὶ Πριάμος καὶ λαὸς ἐνυμνέλιω Πριάμοιο.<sup>8</sup>

‘He wanted to comfort us,’ said Martin Ostwald years later, ‘to tell us this kind of Germany wouldn’t last. It didn’t, but he didn’t either.’<sup>9</sup> His father died in Theresienstadt, his mother in Auschwitz; he learned of their deaths only after the war.

When an initial welcome in England was followed by internment as an enemy alien and transportation to Canada, it took a good deal of luck, pluck, discipline and organization for Martin and his fellow youthful refugees to organize a school (of which he was principal) and gain sufficient recognition for about twenty of them to be accepted to the University of Toronto in 1942, whence he duly graduated in 1946. He got his M.A. at the University of Chicago’s fledgling Committee on Social Thought and there he met his wife Lore; in 1952, under the tutelage of fellow émigré Kurt von Fritz,<sup>10</sup> he received his Ph.D. from Columbia, and in 1958 came to teach

<sup>7</sup> In the preface to Ralph M. Rosen and Joseph Farrell, eds., *Nomodeiktēs: Greek Studies in Honor of Martin Ostwald* (Ann Arbor, 1993) and in ‘Émigré: The College as a Place of Refuge’, *Swarthmore College Bulletin* 100, no. 3 (December, 2002), 34-41 (the section dealing with him is 34-6), available at [http://media.swarthmore.edu/bulletin/wp-content/archived\\_issues\\_pdf/Bulletin\\_2002\\_12.pdf](http://media.swarthmore.edu/bulletin/wp-content/archived_issues_pdf/Bulletin_2002_12.pdf), access date April 29, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Hom. *Il.* 6.448-9.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Émigré’, loc. cit. (n. 7), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Von Fritz, who was not Jewish, had been one of only two German professors (the other was the theologian Karl Barth) who refused to take the oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler in 1934. He was dismissed from the position he had only recently obtained, forbidden use of the Bavarian State Library, and so forced into an exile from which he eventually returned in 1954.

at Swarthmore, one of the great achievements (though not the only one) of Helen North in building that department. That his own education had been so largely a result of his personal initiative must have prepared him well for the Swarthmore honors program, where two weekly seminars were the fixed points around which students had to organize their own research.

He remained at Swarthmore the rest of his life, but in the late sixties he began teaching graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania as well. 'I need graduate students,' he told me at the time. It was obvious to Martin Ostwald, as Jewish sages had emphasized throughout the generations,<sup>11</sup> that teaching was not a distraction from scholarship but its essential foundation, and that the teacher learns from the enterprise even more than the student. Over the decades at Columbia, at Swarthmore, and at Pennsylvania he produced some of the best classicists of America; and he always treated us as colleagues, no matter how much we continued to think of ourselves as his students. After my graduation he insisted that I call him Martin, or even Moshe. I did so to his face, but behind his back I still called him Professor Ostwald. I didn't call my father by his first name, either.

My own father had wanted to be a professor of history, but prejudice<sup>12</sup> had turned him into a lawyer; Martin Ostwald was the son of a lawyer who would probably have followed in his father's footsteps had persecution not made him a professor of history. When he met my father he told him that 'nowadays' people were beginning to look at the development of concepts: to take a word or an idea and see how it had changed throughout time. At the time of this discussion Helen North had just published *Sophrosyne*, and he himself was readying for publication his famous *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy* (Oxford 1969), with which his name became a familiar one throughout the classical world. *Nomos*, however, was by no means merely a matter of 'taking a word or an idea': starting from the observation that the sixth-century term for law, *thesmos*, was entirely supplanted by *nomos* in the fifth century, he offered a radically new interpretation according to which the change was a political slogan of Cleisthenes and a redefinition of what law was and what it should be. His scholarship, like his personality, combined the philological precision of the German tradition with the broad view of an American liberal education. 'This book,' he wrote in his longest and most widely known study, 'differs from other works ... by treating the growth of popular power not as an exclusively political phenomenon but as a movement that came to encompass all major aspects of public life ... It is ... inevitable to give the concept of popular sovereignty not merely political but also religious and social dimensions.'<sup>13</sup> Judiciously summarizing the difficulties in each of our sources, the early and the late, the literary and the epigraphic, he gave each its appropriate weight, just as he had taught us to do.

There were a number of other books and scores of articles spanning history, philosophy, and literature, always with the same broad learning, good sense, and quiet authority. At least a few of his other achievements have to be mentioned: president of the APA in 1987, a member of the

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<sup>11</sup> 'Rabbi Hanina said: I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues than from my teachers, and more from my students than from any of them' (Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 7a, cf. *Makot* 10a). Teachers in other cultures have noticed the same thing — or at least the good teachers have.

<sup>12</sup> He was told by his college advisors that he would never be employed by a university, because it was too obvious from his speech that he came from New York — a polite way of saying that he was a Jew. It was the immigrants who fled Europe and Nazism who destroyed, by their brilliant example, the prejudice that had stood in my father's way.

<sup>13</sup> *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley - New York - London 1986) xix-xx. This book was awarded the APA's Goodwin Award of Merit, the highest prize given for a classical book in America, in 1990.

American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1991, and most poignantly, in 2001, an honorary degree from the University of Dortmund, in the town where he had grown up and from which his family had been shipped to Sachsenhausen concentration camp more than sixty years earlier. But none of them, and nothing I can write, can recreate the man who was both loved and respected by everyone who knew him, and who treated everybody he knew with love and respect.

He was a great friend of the classics in Israel, a regular guest — particularly after his son Mordechai settled here — at each of the universities that boasts a department of classics. Long after his retirement he continued to teach seminars at Tel Aviv University, his restless curiosity offering a different subject with a different partner each time. In the last few years, he was kept at home by the failing health of his wife Lore, from whom he had never been separated; a few months ago, when she was in a rehabilitation home, he wrote<sup>14</sup> that ‘this will be the first Hanukkah in 61 years that we have not been able to celebrate together in our home.’ As his heart began to show the strain that would eventually end his full life, he told his doctors, ‘Keep me alive for one day more than her, so that I can take care of her.’ Heaven decreed otherwise, but not without allowing him to fulfill Solon’s wish:

ὀγδωκοιταέτη μοῖρα κίχοι θανάτου;  
μηδέ μοι ἄκλαυτος θάνατος μόλοι, ἀλλὰ φίλοισι  
καλλείπομι θανῶν ἄλγεα καὶ στοναχάς.<sup>15</sup>

And to add a few words of my own:

πυρὸς ἀπολλύντος γονέας καὶ πάτριον οἶκον  
καὺμ’ ἔλιπες μὲν ὀπισθ’ ἀνδροφόνου τε βίαν  
φῶς δὲ λαβῶν καθαρὸν παρέδωκας κτῆμα μαθηταῖς  
θαλπυρὰν ψυχῶν χαίρε, διδάσκαλέ μου.

Or, *uorsum barbare*,

Out of the fiery hell that consumed both your home and your homeland  
Never did you take the flame and sword of the Angel of Death.  
You took the light and the glow, and illumined a path for your students,  
Warming our hearts with your eyes. Goodbye, then, my teacher and friend.

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<sup>14</sup> To Ra’anana Meridor, who graciously allowed me to see copies of the correspondence.

<sup>15</sup> Solon fr. 20-1 West.