

Rudolf Berthold Schlesinger

October 11, 1909 — November 10, 1996

Rudi and his wife Putti Schlesinger, as they were known to each other and to the world, died together in San Francisco on November 10, 1996 facing in each case suffering, illness, and death. But their lives with each other and among us were an affirmation of the triumph of humanity over the disaster that occurred in Germany in the 1930s. And their triumph was not one of merely surviving and enduring, but a triumph of high achievement even in the face of horrendous moral and social failure.

Rudi Schlesinger was born in Munich in 1909. His parents were comfortably well off and he had a large, extended family that owned a bank in Munich. The family enjoyed a happy bourgeois life in pre-war Germany, and like many successful families, they watched the unfolding of the Nazi nightmare with incredulity and with a hope that it stop. But eventually Rudi's mother became convinced that it would not be stopped and in a breathtaking escape at the last minute after Krystalnacht to Switzerland, the family eventually landed in New York. Putti's family, which was acquainted with Rudi's, left somewhat sooner and their brief early acquaintance was renewed and flowered in New York in the 1940s.

On his arrival in New York, Rudi, who had the equivalent of a doctorate in law, remade himself as an American lawyer, attending Columbia Law School and then clerking for the eminent Irving Lehman on the New York Court of Appeals. During this period Rudi and Putti were married.

In 1948, Rudi was interviewed by Robert Stevens, long-time Dean of the Cornell Law School and offered a job. It seemed like an unlikely match at first, the worldly Jewish Rudi and the insular upstate New York law school but it proved to be a relationship of mutual transformation. Rudi transformed the Law School into a center of international and comparative law. His meticulousness and his vivacity charmed law students and helped move the school to be a world class law school. But in so doing, Rudi did not want the school to be a factory or to ignore the beautiful Ithaca surroundings. He told the story of how he and Putti stayed up late one night considering a job offer from another eminent law school and then the sun came up, splendidly, and landed on Lake Cayuga which they could see from their home. They turned the offer down.

Rudi and Putti were both scholarly. Putti was an eminent critique of art and became, in their post-Cornell existence, the art consultant to the University of California at Hastings Law School. Rudi was a detail-a-phile collecting stories and facts and insights into law and related social phenomenon.

Rudi and Putti have three children and several grandchildren whom they loved. They had high standards for them as for everything in their life and left a legacy of parental commitment and affection. Many students were admitted to this same circle over the years and also labored for the family as gardeners, dog watchers, and child care workers.

Rudi and Putti both faced serious declines at the end, but they were active physically and mentally right up to their decision to leave us together and at peace. We are grateful to them for what they gave us and also mindful of how their escape, along with their families, must remind all of us of the enormity of the Holocaust but the triumph of humanity even over it.

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