

Bernard Lionel Ginsborg (1925-2018)

Bernard was born on 22 January 1925, the youngest child of Henry Ginsborg and Mala Rebbe, who came from Riga (now in Latvia) and Kovno (or Kaunas, now in Lithuania) in 1913 or 1914 (“between the revolutions”, as Mala said). Henry worked in a wharf in east London and was subsequently a supervisor in a toy factory. An older brother, Eddie, died before Bernard was born, but he grew up very close to his sisters Bertha (who became a chemist and lecturer in chemistry at the University of Surrey) and Rebecca, who trained as a lawyer. The family was Jewish and although Bernard became a committed atheist, Jewish thought and identity were important to him throughout his life. He once said that although he could not believe in a god with the ability to attend to the concerns of every individual on the planet, let alone every blade of grass, science – in the form of the Edinburgh Multi-Access Computer, with its multiple terminals (an early fore-runner of the internet) – was capable of proving him wrong. Bernard was not an early reader; he preferred playing cricket in the large garden of the rambling house in Stoke Newington, London, where his parents let out rooms to refugees from Nazi Germany. Nevertheless he won a scholarship to Owen’s Boys School, where he was inspired by a superb maths teacher. In 1939 the school was evacuated to Bedford and, in due course, when their home was bombed out, his mother and sister Rebecca also moved to Bedford so that they could all be together.

A highlight of this period was that Bernard was able to attend rehearsals and concerts given by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, who also relocated to Bedford during the war, and to take first piano, and then, when the family piano had to be sold, violin lessons from a member of the Freyhan family. The (not particularly good) violin had belonged to Bernard’s grandfather, and was subsequently passed down the family to Bernard’s elder daughter Jane (who became a professional singer, and then a music psychologist) and his granddaughter. These experiences laid the ground for a life-long love of classical music. Mahler and Wolf were particularly important composers for him; he once said that he would save Bach for his old age but by the time he might have got round to listening systematically to the music of Bach, he had discovered – in part under the influence of his son-in-law, who is a composer – the joys of 20th century and contemporary music. At this time Bernard also fulfilled the role of *chazzan* (cantor) for the Bedford United Hebrew Congregation. He had a wonderful singing voice, deployed at home in the traditional prayers and songs of Jewish festivals such as the Passover Seder service and Chanukah, but also on walks when he would attempt to sing whole symphonies.

Bernard was encouraged to apply for Oxford or Cambridge but resisted: his family was poor, and he did not think he would enjoy the life of a student there. Instead he went to Reading University to study physics. At Reading he *did* enjoy student life. He was active in the drama society, directing Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* and playing Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, flirted with the Communist Party and listened to as much recorded music as he could. He also met his future wife, Andrina (Andy or Andie), who – recently returned from upstate New York, where she had been evacuated during the war – was studying psychology and economics at Reading. They went out together for a few months but after their initial relationship ended, they did not reconnect until ten years later, by which time she had become friendly with his sister Rebecca who was briefly involved with Andy’s youngest uncle.

Bernard completed his first, general degree in 1945 and applied for a commission in the RAF, but the war ended and physicists were now in demand. He went on to take a BSc (Hons.) in physics, which he completed in 1948, but did not want to undertake any work that might

contribute to the development of nuclear weapons (nevertheless his first research job resulted in waterproof packaging for cigarettes, with potentially equally devastating consequences for the health of smokers). Instead, he did a PhD under the supervision of R. W. Ditchburn on eye movements, awarded in 1953. Meanwhile he became, simultaneously, a post-doctoral research fellow in the Department of Biophysics at UCL, where he was mentored by Bernard Katz, among contemporaries including Liam Burke, David Maurice and Paul Fatt, and an undergraduate student of physiology. Bernard's first scientific publication appeared in the *Review of Scientific Instruments* (1951) and reported research undertaken at Reading with Ollie Heavens; his second was a letter to *Nature* (1952). He published in the *Journal of Physiology*, for which he became a member of the Editorial Board in 1966, as early as 1953. At UCL.

Bernard and Andy got married in 1953. His first post-doctoral job was at the Medical Research Council in Mill Hill where he worked for Walter Perry, and it is not altogether coincidental that his mother-in-law became a member of the first cohort of Open University students in 1968. When Perry was asked to establish a lab at the University of Edinburgh in 1958 Bernard and Andy moved north in the expectation that they would return after a year or two. In the event, Bernard obtained a lectureship at Edinburgh in 1962. He ascended the academic ladder swiftly: he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1971, was appointed to a personal chair in 1975 and subsequently to the City Chair of *Materia Medica* (and then *Pharmacology*) on the retirement of his predecessor, Eric Horton, at the end of 1979. He retired after a four-year stint as head of the Department of *Pharmacology* (1980-1984) in 1990. Meanwhile, Andy, who had trained as an infant teacher and then as a clinical child psychologist, enjoyed a long career at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh.

Until 1963, when Beeching destroyed much of the railway network (the Ginsborgs did not acquire a car until 1973), family holidays involved long, usually wet, hikes in the north-west of Scotland; for the next ten years, holidays were spent with Andy's mother in Eton, with frequent day trips to visit Bernard and Andy's extended families in London. In 1973, Bernard embarked on a year's sabbatical at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris, working with Hersch Gershenfeld, Philippe Ascher and JacSue Kehoe, among others. Hersch invited Bernard and Andy to stay in his apartment in Villefranche, on the Cote d'Azur, and from then Bernard and Andy spent a whole month each summer in France: at first in Nice, then in Collioure, where they enjoyed walking and swimming. Occasional forays were made to Italy – there were two memorable summers at Il Saraceno in Ravello – but when Andy's mother died they determined to retire to the South of France. They bought a tiny apartment in St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, which became their home from September to mid-June each year from 1990 to 2001, when they found a larger apartment near the university in Nice, where they lived until 2010.

The Ginsborgs were immensely sociable – their daughters Jane and Hannah, a philosopher, recall frequent visitors, usually scientific but sometimes artistic or musical – for whom Andy would prepare delicious meals, and who were often subjected to long walks around Edinburgh and its environs. They were regular concert-, opera- and playgoers (the more avant-garde the better) and unlike many of the Edimbourgeoisie who go on holiday in August, relished the Edinburgh Festival and everything it had to offer. They were passionate art-lovers, counting artists including David Fowkes and Frankie Thwaites amongst their closest friends; the National Galleries of Scotland, including the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland and what came to be known as Modern One and Two were regular haunts, as were

the Kelvingrove and Hunterian Museums in Glasgow. In retirement, they attended concerts and operas in Nice and Monaco and lectures on art, narratology and philosophy. They walked and swam, and made frequent trips to Italy. Bernard, more fluent than Andy in French, ran an English conversation class, which he took as seriously as he had taken his teaching in the Medical School at the University of Edinburgh; he also started writing a book on probability. Andy described these 20 years as the happiest of their lives.

They returned to Edinburgh when Andy's health began to fail and Bernard, who had long outlived his parents and siblings, was anxious that she should not be left alone in France should he predecease her. He was assiduous in his care for her – she died in 2013 – and thereafter he made a huge effort to live as he was sure she would have wanted: he kept fit by walking and swimming, learned to cook for himself and enjoyed inventing new dishes. He listened to music (although he attended no concerts after she died, not even those of his concert pianist grandson), became a devotee of Radio 4 and read widely. As time went on, however, he missed Andy more and more. His daughters and grandchildren were no substitute, and although he spoke regularly to friends and family on the phone, entertaining them in person became too much of an effort. As little as two weeks before he died he could still be described as being “in good form” but by then he had really had enough of life, and it became clear to his daughters that he had decided to take matters into his own hands by stopping eating and drinking. Jane and Hannah were with him when he died, peacefully, at home, on 26 June 2018. Although he had rescinded the gift of his body to medical science on the grounds that it would be too much trouble for the University, he nevertheless left explicit instructions that there was to be no funeral or religious ceremony of any kind. He will be much missed by his family, friends and former colleagues around the world.

Jane Ginsborg
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