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In Memoriam

Professor Rudolf B. Schlesinger

By JAMES R. McCALL*

Rudi Schlesinger was a law professor in the same sense that Joe DiMaggio was a baseball player and Fred Astaire was a dancer. All three men combined extraordinary talent and discipline to perform their callings so well that they established a level of performance that few, if any, can reach. All three made what they did and how they did it look very, very easy. The three of them brought a sense of manners and restraint to their calling. And, above all, these three men, DiMaggio, Astaire, and Schlesinger, brought natural dignity, personal charm, and a quality of joy in life to their work.

The shorthand for this is charisma—a personal magic arousing special loyalty or enthusiasm. Make no doubt about it, from the day Rudi Schlesinger came to Hastings in 1975, he was our star and everyone knew it. The person that distant faculty colleagues knew was always genial, mannerly, impeccably turned out—a true Brooks Brothers man—and reticent in faculty meetings. That he was devoted to his wife was obvious to all. As was the fact that he spent no time in the faculty lounge, because, and this was not obvious, he generally preferred to have lunch and spend break times with Prutti than with colleagues. Everyone on the faculty also knew of his awesome reputation for scholarship and everyone associated with Hastings knew he was extremely popular with the students in his classes.

Colleagues who were closer to him knew a man who was elegant—far from effete—but elegant in dress, manners, conversation, and taste. They also knew Rudi had a clear-eyed view of the world and the potential for evil in it, and he had a very good understanding of the harder side of life. His experience of life furnished him with that view and that understanding.

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In 1933, he graduated from the University of Munich with a law degree and worked in the family banking business. He had to flee the Nazi regime and start all over again in New York in 1938. All of it had worked out very, very well; but he did not forget the hard times or the hard years.

Nonetheless, I think the most prominent, well, the second most prominent, hallmark of Rudi Schlesinger was his sense of humor. He had an impish, wry humor and it took in everything. He could find reason to laugh, or at least chuckle, in all things—things large and small, good and bad. I remember him telling me with great laughter about the problems encountered by one of his law practice colleagues in New York, long since gone to his reward, because he was a “chaser,” always getting diverted by attractive women and always attempting to realize his desires. A man who was the most devoted husband possible obviously saw his long ago colleague’s problems as completely understandable and the more humorous for that reason. I remember him chuckling about a German word that means taking pleasure in the misfortune of others and the conclusions to draw about people speaking a language that includes such a word.

He revered the silent movie comedian, Buster Keaton. I remember Rudi telling me that when he was a boy in Munich, he once fell out of his chair at the movie theater laughing at a Keaton sketch. Rudi knew all the Keaton movies and he knew all the comic stunts that Keaton did. Another vivid memory is the humor and delight Rudi took in recalling what his boyhood soccer coach had said to him in front of the entire team, something to the effect of, “Schlesinger, you are stupid, but you are faaaaaaast.” He had a way of saying that emphatic “a” that I know everyone in this room can remember, just the way anyone who had any contact with Rudi Schlesinger professionally will always think of how he said “cone-tract” (contract). His personality made a mark.

But above all, the real hallmark of Rudi Schlesinger to people who knew him well was the quality of thought he brought to every topic of conversation. Always, he had a fresh way of looking at something—a new way of seeing a problem. Be it a faculty issue, a personal career decision, anything that you could possibly mention, the play of his mind was stunning, always, twenty-four hours a day and in any setting. He had a truly luminous intelligence that was never absent.

He was a devoted father and husband. His relationship with Prutti was so very close. They shared the experience of being German

émigrés as young adults. They shared a love of opera, art, the life of the mind generally, and of course, a deep devotion to their children and grandchildren. More generally, Rudi and Prutti shared a sense of culture, manners, and perspective. The way in which they handled their private grief over the death of their daughter June, a lovely young woman and mother of small children, was a lesson in the stoic values.

I will always think of Prutti as a one woman Hastings aesthetic patrol. She was forever scouting new locations for pictures. You would come around the corner on the faculty floor and there you would see her staring at a blank wall and thinking, and thinking and thinking. And then occasionally you would round a corner and find Prutti with her crew—three, four, five men in blue jumpsuits—all of them standing around, apparently needed to hang a very small picture or two. I think she captivated the facilities staff just as she captivated everyone else.

Every meeting beyond the most casual with Prutti was a social occasion because of her beautiful manners—manners based on an appreciation of the dignity and worth of everyone. The same, of course, was true of Rudi—perfect manners based on the same sense of the dignity and worth of every person. The only difference was that with Rudi, the warmth and good humor was closer to the surface—there for everyone to see.

To those of you who were his students and were charmed by his personality and literally awed by his brilliance, I want you to know that his faculty colleagues were charmed and awed in the same way. To those of you who might have wondered what the real Rudi Schlesinger was like, his friends will all tell you that if you scratched the surface of Rudi Schlesinger, what you found, thank God, was simply more of the personal qualities he displayed in the classroom or on public occasions. He was deeper in more private moments with friends, when his understanding of misfortune and appreciation of the darker emotions could be seen. But he was always thoughtful, considerate, humorous, and ready to apply that wonderful intelligence to the problems and concerns of others. He was a great man, viewed from any perspective and from any distance.

Rudi and Prutti brightened the lives of us all while they were with us. Now memories of them will continue to brighten our lives for years to come. They were gracious and graceful to the core, and it is impossible to think of these two very exceptional people without smiling. Knowing them was a gift.

