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In Memoriam Walter Benesch, 1932-2017

My friend, Walter Benesch, died in August 2017, at home with his family around him. His wife, Renate, told me that he lived his life just as he liked and died in tranquility, leaving behind many of us who admired and loved him.

Walter was that rare academic who bridged disciplines: comparative history, Slavic literature, comparative philosophy, and comparative Western and Chinese philosophy. He was a wonderful husband, devoted father to two boys (who were brought up without television in their home), and a man who could think great thoughts while tending his garden, raising chickens and turkeys, thereby feeding his family through the very cold Fairbanks, Alaska, winters. He also continued to teach philosophy gratis after his retirement because the demand was so great. There had been no great demand for philosophy in Alaska before Walter's splendid professorship. Philosophy majors have learned to think outside the box, which makes them valuable employees in almost any enterprise.

The year that I first met him at an ISCS conference, I gave the final paper and he and his 17-year-old son Oleg (currently a professor in England) asked "Do you take your show on the road?" (he liked my presentation) and I said: "Absolutely." As soon as I returned home, there was an invitation from Walter to visit the University of Alaska in Fairbanks for a week as a "visiting scholar." I accepted, and then he gave me the date: mid-February!" He scraped together an honorarium from four departments and I prepared four lectures appropriate to those disciplines. The honorarium was used to buy winter clothes that I would need in temperatures of 18 degrees below zero! I am a Californian.

Walter and I have been friends ever since, and I am very fond of his son Oleg (who joined our association as a scholar of Japanese Culture) and a great admirer of his wife Renate, whom he met and married while getting his doctorate in Austria. Walter was a superb scholar and a surprisingly good author of books for children that were both fun and informative. He was a phenomenon as a universal man in a time of increasing narrow specialization.

He was interviewed by his Fairbanks newspaper, the Peninsula Clarion, in 2002, with such a charming description of this unusual man that we offer it here.

Walter, we will all miss you.

Laina Farhat-Holzman

Retired UAF Philosophy Professor Tunes Into Chickens

Posted: Friday, September 13, 2002

By GEORGE BRYSON

Anchorage Daily News

FAIRBANKS (AP) -- Sometimes when retired University of Alaska Fairbanks philosophy professor Walter Benesch attends a conference and addresses some of the greatest thinkers in the world, his German-born wife, Renate, can't help but have her doubts.

Her husband can talk Eastern and Western philosophy with the best of them, she says — just as he did a year ago at a meeting of the International Association of Chinese Philosophers at the University of Beijing.

"But as he's standing up there and delivering some paper, I think: If they only knew where this started ... as he was mucking out the chicken yard."

Sitting now in his comfortable Fairbanks home surrounded by more than an acre of sunny gardens, bordered by a poultry pen, Benesch laughs hearing his wife divulge his secret.

It's true, he says. You can learn a lot from chickens.

"The chickens' view of life is really philosophical: You see out of both sides of your head at the same time, and you're not worried about tomorrow. It's very Buddhist. Chickens are very, very Buddhist."

Benesch's wide-ranging commentaries — reflecting on current events in the context of history, literature, science and philosophy — are heard across about half the state each Monday (with the exception of the Anchorage area) on "Alaska Edition," the prize-winning public radio program produced by Fairbanks station KUAC. (Anchorage residents can listen to audio files of the show archived on the Web at www.kuac.org/alaskaedition.html.)

Benesch, 68, began to question his own assumptions way back in college. Raised in the desert country of southern Colorado in the 1930s and '40s, he thought he was going to be a pastor when he enrolled in the University of Denver but changed his mind after a couple of years as a history major.

"If you get a lot of history, you have trouble with theology," he says. "All you have to do is encounter the wars of Reformation, where God wants Catholics to kill Protestants and Protestants to kill Catholics."

That, and discovering Alaska.

His parents had driven the family up the new Alaska Highway in the summer of 1950, and he'd relished the cooler climate. He'd returned to work on a stream survey in Sitka during his summers off from college and brought with him a pile of books. That's when he began developing an interest in Dostoevsky and other Russian authors.

"The library at the University of Denver would let me take as many boxes of books as I wanted," he says, "so I would pack them with Russian literature."

It was an interest that would take his life in a new direction just a few years later.

After earning a master's degree at the University of Montana, serving a two-year tour of duty in the Army at Fort Richardson, then taking a job in Anchorage teaching ninth-grade English, he won a local Rotary fellowship to attend college in Austria for a year, studying Russian and Slavic cultures.

But the hard part lay ahead: attending doctorate-level classes taught entirely in German at Leopold-Franzens University in Innsbruck. The only way to make the leap in language, he decided, was to begin speaking German full time.

"The moment I got off the plane, I stopped all English," Benesch says. "It took about six weeks to two months, and then suddenly that was it. Of course, it was a lot of work after that, but I was now thinking in the language. I wasn't translating anymore. I didn't have to make the leap."

He'd also met Renate, a young German translator who'd earlier attended school in America as part of her own student exchange — and was far more adept at English than Benesch was at German. They dated as he continued his studies in Innsbruck, then they married in 1963 after he earned his doctorate in Slavic studies.

There was only one condition, Renate says.

"He said you'll have to live in Alaska. He was very clear on that. And when I made up my mind, I knew there wouldn't be any wiggle room."

In 1963, Benesch landed a job at UAF teaching courses in English, history and philosophy. A few years later, he began teaching full time in the university's fledgling philosophy department.

They acquired a little cabin on five acres in an undeveloped part of Fairbanks north of the university and never moved away. They raised two boys — Ilya, now 33, and Oleg, 24 — in a bilingual household. Though mostly they spoke German.

“Since Renate and I met in Austria, we've always spoken German,” Benesch says, “so we decided when we came back we would just stick with that, and we still do. This is a German house. And when the kids came along, we kept it. So, the kids are bilingual.”

To help them remain that way, Walt and Renate decided to raise them without television.

“It's been a real interesting experiment,” Benesch says, “but it's worked beautifully.”

Renate credits her husband with “living his philosophy.”

Which seems inspired partly by the post-Aristotelian school of skeptics who valued intellectual inquiry and partly by modern advances in science and theories of relativity, which have found that two seemingly contradictory answers can be right after all.

“The particle explanation of light is right — in certain circumstances,” Benesch says, “and the wave explanation of light is correct. They're both right. And so, you get rid of the idea of contradiction.”

But a certain Buddhist “appreciation for the present” was also evident — outdoors, in the family poultry pens, as Benesch returned to his chores.

The turkeys and chickens were calling.