

Henri Begleiter—A Personal Tribute

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THE OUTSTANDING SCIENTIFIC contributions of Henri Begleiter in the fields of genetics and electrophysiology of alcoholism have been widely recognized and are described in the accompanying tributes to him by the colleagues with whom he collaborated most closely in that work. The present tribute is on a more personal level, relating to some of the experiences that helped to shape the highly principled yet humane and warm personality that his friends knew.

Henri was born in Nîmes, France, on September 11, 1935, and was barely 4 years old when the Second World War began. When the German armies broke through the Allied defenses in 1940 and swept rapidly through the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, his parents looked for ways to ensure his safety. Although the family was Jewish, they had become good friends of the Catholic priest in the small town where they vacationed. They therefore entrusted Henri to the care of the priest, who disguised him as an altar boy and provided him with the necessary raiment and training to enable him to play the role that ensured his safety from the Nazis and their collaborators. Throughout the years in which France was occupied, the kindly and courageous priest sheltered Henri without ever exerting pressure on him to convert to Catholicism and returned him readily to his parents when they reappeared after the liberation of France. As Henri himself related it, this experience taught him that neither good nor evil is the exclusive prerogative of any culture, nationality, or religion and that all individuals are entitled to be judged on their own personal qualities.

This dramatic experience undoubtedly reinforced the high ethical standards that Henri lived up to, and it may also explain some of the other aspects of his personality and temperament. He himself remained loyal to his Jewish background, but was able to appreciate the merits of people from all backgrounds, provided that they shared the same standards and values. Equally, he could be a severe and uncompromising critic of those from his own culture if he found their values and principles to be unworthy. In scientific matters, he could be an equally stern critic of what he considered poorly thought out hypotheses and experiments, but he distinguished clearly between the ideas and the persons. On site visits, he sought to encourage and

stimulate young researchers, even if he had to criticize some of their work. His sense of fairness also ensured that he could accept what might appear to be criticism of his own work when he found it valid, even if it made him downcast for a while to do so.

His early experience of living through years of constant uncertainty and danger probably contributed to the very high value that he placed on his personal friendships and his strong loyalty to them. In German, the word *Begleiter* means a companion, and Henri was indeed a great companion. His wide-ranging interests, sense of humor, acute observations, and openness to other societies and cultures made it a pleasure to travel with him. Yet despite his outstanding abilities and talents, he had a surprising degree of modesty. When he received the Jellinek Award, he asked that the presentation ceremony be kept very simple and factual, with no flowery, glowing tributes to him and his work, and said that he would keep his reply equally simple. But when his turn came to acknowledge the award, he used it to turn attention away from himself and instead to pay a glowing tribute to the presenter, based on their long friendship.

Henri had another trait that may also have owed something to his early experience of danger: he was expert at keeping a stiff upper lip and not complaining when problems arose. As his friends knew, he had many serious medical problems. Yet throughout them, he never seemed to feel sorry for himself or to seek special attention from those around him. He appreciated the genuine concern of his friends, but always assured them that he was doing well and would soon be back to normal and, above all, that the research was going well in any case, and that was what really mattered! That was the message that he conveyed to the writer only a few weeks before his death. At times, his refusal to let his health problems interfere with his work could appear to be due to a stubborn streak in his personality. It seems more likely, however, that it was due to a refusal to let himself be cowed by the inevitable.

Henri Begleiter was an excellent scientist, a highly interesting and stimulating observer and thinker, and a warm and loyal friend. He will be greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues in the field of alcohol studies.

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