

My Grandfather Richard Wilhelm

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What kind of a person was Richard Wilhelm?

Since I never met my grandfather – he died more than 20 years before I was born – this was my question, which increasingly turned into a quest at the beginning of my film project.

Of course I knew that he came to China as a missionary. And that, instead of baptizing a Chinese congregation he delved deep into Chinese wisdom and translated the Classics: The I Ching, Confucius, Lao-tse and Dschuangtse, Mencius and more.

The books of his translations stood on the shelves in our home. Later I wondered how a single person could achieve all of this in one lifetime considering his work as a missionary and later as a University Professor. Even though he died young at the age of 56, he left a huge legacy.

Again and again I postponed my film project about my grandfather – it seemed too difficult.

But finally I embarked on the journey of getting acquainted with Richard Wilhelm and his work. It became the most fruitful journey of my life so far.

I found out, that the Bavarian Academy of Sciences in Munich housed his entire life's work. The index of his work contained 43 pages – just the index!

One of the biggest treasures I discovered were his childhood memories – he had reconstructed them during his second stay in China in Beijing around 1923. These childhood memories gave me an insight how he became the person he was.

He describes himself as being shortsighted – but this slightly blurred vision made him look at the entirety of things instead of getting lost in details. In German we have a saying: „den Wald vor

lauter Bäumen nicht sehen “ – „you don’t see the forest if you just look for the trees “. He saw the forest.

He also describes himself as being a romantic (person) in his youth, with great longing to escape the narrow world of his hometown Stuttgart and to travel to faraway countries.

He was artistically talented. In the film you see some of his drawings. And he played the violin well. There was a lot of music in his home in Qingdao, with him playing his violin, my grandmother Salome playing the piano, often joined by friends for house concerts.

When he was young he even was drawn to study arts, but later in his life he decided to make the reality of life his priority. He writes that the seriousness of life has weakened his enthusiasm for the arts.

My grandfather Richard Wilhelm saw himself as a „Wanderer “.

Quoting him: „My intention is, to increasingly adjust to being a Wanderer. What is important in my case is to learn the art of being at home while wandering. “

He quickly felt at home in China. He was not only deeply attracted to the old Chinese wisdom, which he soon started to study, but he also immediately liked the Chinese people. He never focused on differences, but on the common grounds.

This is why he liked to quote two sayings of his two heroes Goethe and Confucius.

Goethe said: Orient and Occident (East and West) cannot be separated.

Confucius said: Within the four seas all men are brothers.

The Chinese Wisdom not only became increasingly his major focus in life through his work of translations, it also proved to be an anchor in difficult times. An anchor, which united people of different nationalities even during hostilities like war.

This he describes during the horror of the first World War in 1914:

„During the siege (by the Japanese) of Qingdao, when I was in charge of the Chinese Red Cross, not a day passed in which I did not devote some time to the study of ancient Chinese wisdom. It was a curious coincidence that in the encampment outside the city, the besieging Japanese

commander, General Kamio, was reading the Book of Mencius in his moments of relaxation, while I, as a German, was similarly delving into Chinese wisdom in my free hours. Happiest of all, however, was an old Chinese who was so wholly absorbed in his sacred books that not even a grenade falling at his side could disturb his calm. He reached out for it – it was a dud – then drew back his hand and, remarking that it was very hot, forthwith returned to his books. “

Richard Wilhelm thought of the translation of the I Ching, the Book of Changes, to be his most important achievement.

He used it as a source of wisdom as well as an oracle.

But the Yijing-oracle is not used for mere prediction. The topic of how to encounter fate and how to shape one's fate is dominating, as well as the questions of coincidence and fate. Jung later created the term synchronicity to describe this phenomenon.

In an essay about experiencing and shaping fate (published in „Man and Being “ after his death in 1939) he writes:

„All which is happening in our world has a cause... Every coincidence is necessary, because every coincidence has a cause. That we don't always recognize the connection of the causes of events, does not prove the contrary. We can't tell from an outer perspective. But from the perspective of meaning (Sinn) we can tell for us the difference between coincidence and fate.

Every day we meet people on the street. We don't even see them, they have no meaning for us.

That the sequence of events leads them in a certain time to a certain place, is of no significance for us. We call it coincidence. But then we meet one person in a thousand, who means something to us, who enters our life and changes it. Such a meaningful encounter becomes fate. It does not count so much what we experience, but how we experience it.

It seems that fate is something, which belongs to every person individually.

The next step is to understand the connections of fateful coincidences. These we cannot grasp by rational logic alone, here intuition is needed. If we're lucky we can understand in this way that the causes of events are no special magic but follow a fateful internal organization.

Let's suppose it is me who somehow causes my fate. But who is this „me “? I am not conscious that I wanted everything what is happening to me, I rather have the feeling that all of this

originates from somebody else or from „divine powers “ who don't ask what I want. This often causes resentment against one's fate. Why is this happening to me?

But is this the right attitude?

In my grandfather's opinion the organization of one's fate may not be rationally understood, but it is not a sequence of external coincidences. Fate belongs to each person individually. And from this point of view one can proceed to the right way to shape one's fate. The first condition to shape one's fate is to accept it, to welcome it and to feel responsible for it. From there the possibility opens up to shape it. The work is to develop one's consciousness. Only the person, who understands the laws of fate becomes a sovereign creator of his life. Here the factor of time becomes important, the changes in time, because events happen in a sequence in time. The laws of changes in time need to be understood. Insight needs to be developed that everything develops from a nearly unrecognizable seed. In this stage for example things are easy to shape, but they need to be recognized. If one is sensitive to do the right thing at the right time one can really meet one's fate, according to my grandfather. This is where the Yijing comes in as, let's say, a councillor. My grandfather took these insights from the I Ching, the Book of Changes. Mastering this level of understanding the laws of change, my grandfather concludes his essay, fate is no longer some dark power. It is now the artist's material, who, not minding superficial luck or misfortune, creates life finding its meaning like a weaver creates a fabric, where the colourful threads bring forth shining patterns.

To end of my little speech on a lighter tone, I'd like to relate a story about the relationship of my grandfather and C.G. Jung, which I particularly like. It shows the playful side of both their characters.

A participant at the congress of the „Kulturbund “ (Union of Cultures) in Prague in the year 1928 (29?) tells the story. I found it in Richard Wilhelm's biography, written by his wife Salome after her husband's death, published in 1956.

So, Mrs. Jacobi, the participant, recounts:

Not only was Wilhelm present, but also C.G. Jung, the other big moving force. Like Wilhelm, everybody who encountered him, was touched in his soul.

She quotes, what C.G. Jung said in an obituary about his friend Richard Wilhelm: „ We met in a human realm, which starts beyond the academic borders. “

Mrs Jacobi, appreciating that she could share this realm describes Wilhelm and Jung as true and unpretentious, where psychological depth unites with spiritual modesty. They bridge the ancient wisdom of the East with the urgent search of the West.

Ignoring social conventions and evading the limelight, they behaved as two students on vacation. Joyous almost carefree, always ready to avoid the pressure of authority of the audience, they disappeared at the most unusual times in order to stroll around town. Or they visited a cozy bar for a glass of wine instead of attending an elegant reception.

How exasperated the officials seemed to be, when Jung and Wilhelm, each with two ladies on their arms, carrying the beautiful candelabras of the table decoration like in a procession made their way through the packed halls. Trailed by a crowd of enthusiastic followers they proceeded to one of the cellar pubs, which was shamefully hidden under the rooms of the festive congregation.

Here, according to Mrs. Jacobi, they casually sat at a big table around the two masters, who also proved in drinking and joyfulness to be true masters of life.

Wilhelm knew how to tell especially appealing stories from the treasures of the East, and Jung added the European equivalents.

Two worlds opened up and joined, mirroring the paths of human lives in joy and suffering. Often the friends stayed glued to the stories of the narrator, or the chaos of voices became indistinguishable. Again and again the stories were interrupted by loud laughter, which was usually led by Jung, drawing in the others. Here it was enlightening to see the differences in human nature between Jung and Wilhelm, which were so deep that they, like all fundamental opposites, were fruitful in complementing each other.

As said, nothing showed this more than their way of laughing. Jung's laughter sounded strong and forceful, one might almost say naive and raw, martian. On the other hand Wilhelm's laughter sounded soft, heartfelt, subdued and childlike. With both of them it originated from the fullness of their creative essence, liberating and redeeming, as a witness to their love of life. I never imagined, Mrs. Jacobi writes, that Wilhelm's love of life could be so burning. “

Bettina Wilhelm, Oct. 5th, 2013



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