

JEAN VAN HEIJENOORT: AN ALL TOO BRIEF ACQUAINTANCE*

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I first met Jean van Heijenoort in July of 1982, when I became one of those involved in editing Kurt Gödel's *Collected Works*. Thus I never got to know him in the personal way that many others did. But I certainly worked intensively with Van and thereby came to know very well some of those characteristics of his that others have already mentioned. Gentle, patient, persistent – we have heard those epithets repeated over and over again.

Because of our work together on the Gödel Editorial Project, I find it particularly poignant that we are gathered to mourn Van on this day, one month after his death, which happens also to be the 80th anniversary of Gödel's birth. In several respects, Van played a pivotal role in our committee's work: He was one of its instigators; he and Greg Moore were instrumental in convincing Sol Feferman to become editor-in-chief; he was our principal linguist; and, by virtue of his emeritus status, he was actually the only one able to devote his full energies to the project. Of course his historical expertise and philosophical erudition were immense. And they were matched with a formidable tenacity. At times his dogged insistence on matters of style and aesthetics could be exasperating. But I say that with full affection for him.

We had our share of disagreements – all, I'm happy to say, on linguistic matters. I think perhaps we fought over more commas and gerunds than ever before in my editorial experience. In all our disputes, Van presented his arguments most cogently and forcefully. But his forcefulness was always tempered by his respect for all of us as colleagues. I myself felt somewhat daunted by his linguistic competence and the tremendous breadth and depth of his knowledge. Yet, at the same time, I

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always felt that he treated me as an equal. I don't think he really had reason to; still, it was pleasant not to be treated as the junior faculty member that I rightly was. Certainly I learned a great deal from Van, and I am grateful to him also for introducing me to his friend Stefan Bauer-Mengelberg, in whose company we often worked together. For I believe Stefan to be another cast from the same mold.

In assessing the impact of Van's death on our committee, I am reminded of Southey's words: "The loss of a friend is like that of a limb; time may heal the anguish of the wound, but the loss cannot be repaired."

I would like now to turn from the work of the Gödel committee and make a few very personal remarks. Several times in my life, I have had the good fortune to develop a friendship with an older individual who, through breadth of experience, keenness of intellect and depth of character, has profoundly enriched my outlook on life. Van was one of those, and to him I am especially indebted for providing me with a model of the very highest standards of scholarly inquiry and integrity. Our acquaintance was all too brief, but I cherish his memory, and I hope that in some small way I may also have enriched his life.

In the very last weeks of his life I believe that I did, through my belated discovery of the correspondence between Gödel and Herbrand for which Van had searched in vain for nearly twenty years. I recall his unusual joy and excitement when I all too casually sent him copies of that correspondence; and I have to confess that at the time I did so I was not fully aware of the significance of what I had found.

I knew that there was a lost letter from Herbrand to Gödel, in which Herbrand had proposed a more general definition of the notion of recursive function; and when I began my cataloguing of the Gödel *Nachlass*, Van had reminded me to keep an eye out for it. So, at first, I searched diligently for the letter, spurred on by the finding of a great many envelopes on which Gödel had written Herbrand's name, together with a shorthand annotation. But, to my dismay and puzzlement, in none of those envelopes did I find anything relating to Herbrand. The mystery was only dispelled some months later, when my wife finally learned to read the shorthand. As it turned out, the annotations read "*durchgesehen wegen Herbrand*" – "looked through on account of Herbrand" (and, apparently,

not found!) – so I had just repeated Gödel’s own fruitless searches.

After that, I ceased to look for the missing letter, and only much later, when things became very hectic, did it turn up; I can tell that from the decimal numeration I employed to indicate intercalations in the archival sequence. Along with it there was also Gödel’s reply, but at the time I was so rushed that I simply stamped the items and filed them in an appropriate folder. Later, just before I left Princeton, I made photocopies of items that I thought might be of special interest, including the Gödel-Herbrand correspondence. But by then the editorial work was in full swing, so I didn’t have much time to study what I had copied.

Then, one day in February of 1986, I received a letter from Van announcing that he was off to Paris, where, among other things, he hoped to make one last effort to find Gödel’s letter to Herbrand. On a previous visit he had somewhere found a fragment of that letter, in French, and he enclosed a copy of that fragment in his letter to me. With that in hand I rather idly looked in my files and discovered that what he had sent me was a translation of a part of the German original, of which I had the complete text. So I sent him a copy of my find, along with a note saying “You might also be interested in the letter to which he was replying, which I am also enclosing.”

You can well imagine the barrage of letters I received from Van on his return from France – the last examples I have of his florid calligraphy. It was then my embarrassed duty to explain to him how I had overlooked the correspondence all that time, and I worried he might think that I had been holding out on him! But he never accused me of that, and I think his joy at having the texts before him overwhelmed any suspicions he might have harbored. He began immediately to edit the letters for inclusion in the fourth volume of Gödel’s *Collected Works*. It was his last contribution to our project before he departed on his fateful trip to Mexico.

And so, abruptly, our friendship came to an end. I deeply regret its loss and can only say: May he rest in peace, and may the substance and spirit of his work continue to inform and inspire posterity.