

Maria Weigert Brendel 1902-1994 by Larissa Bonfante

(I first met Mrs. Brendel as the wife of my professor, Otto J. Brendel. After his death, we were often in touch, either by phone or through visits to the Riverside Drive apartment. She was then extremely active as her husband's literary executor, contacting publishers, translating and editing his works, and as a scholar in her own right. Most recently, I had the privilege of speaking to her daughter, Cornelia Brendel Foss, a successful painter, who told me stories of the family's leaving Rome, and eventually Europe, to come to America.)

Maria Weigert was born on December 18, 1902, in Berlin. Her father was a judge, and her mother, the favorite daughter of a rich banker, was herself independent-spirited: at the age of 18, she traveled through Egypt. Beautiful, spirited and energetic, Maria Weigert broke through the "boys only" tradition of the German Gymnasium. Mrs. Brendel often spoke of her friendship with Dietrich Boenhoffer, her neighbor and inseparable best friend from the time they were four years old. They were in the same class at school -- a photograph of attentive schoolchildren in Dietrich Boenhoffer's biography shows them together in 1920-21. When the time came to leave the elementary school, Dietrich was to go to the Gymnasium. Maria told her parents she wanted to go to the Gymnasium too. Girls did not attend at that time, but Maria insisted, and her father, who was a judge, arranged it.

After the Gymnasium Dietrich went to study for the ministry. He eventually

became a Lutheran minister and a great hero, helping Jews and other victims of the Nazis, participating in the first plot to kill Hitler, imprisoned and executed when he was found out. Maria went on to the University of Heidelberg, where she studied with the famous Professor Ludwig Curtius. It was in his classes at the University of Heidelberg that she met her fellow student and future husband. Otto J. Brendel, already a cigar smoker and bon vivant, brilliant scholar, creative poet, philosopher and painter, was understandably Curtius's favorite student. The two soon became engaged. She was almost finished with her degree, writing her dissertation on the Ludovisi Throne, when her father summoned her home. Her brother had gone to visit her in Heidelberg, had seen her slippers under Otto Brendel's bed, and reported this to their father, who removed her at once from the University. She was thus prevented from completing her doctorate, and thereby lost any hope of ever having an independent career in a Germany so respectful of academic status. And so, while Otto Brendel (b. October 10, 1901), only a year older than Maria, received his doctorate in 1928 with a dissertation on the portraits of Augustus -- later published, and like most of his writings, widely influential -- she went home to prepare the wedding.

The two were married in 1929. There followed a *Wanderjahre* in Italy and Greece (1929-30) with a stipend from the German Archaeological Institute. In 1931 they moved to Otto's new position at the University of Erlangen, near Nuremberg: Curtius, too, had started at Erlangen his brilliant his university career. Their daughter, Cornelia, was born there. On leave from Erlangen, in 1932, they went to Rome, where Otto Brendel had been awarded the prestigious and promising post of First Assistant at the German Archaeological Institute, under Ludwig Curtius as Director. "His tasks were administrative but he also lectured and found time for intensive research in the museums

and excavations of Italy." These were glorious years. In 1936 Otto Brendel received a letter -- in his daughter's possession -- informing him he had been dismissed from his post because he was married to a non-Aryan. Hitler's racial laws had now left him without a job, and the three of them had to leave Rome (Curtius, who opposed National Socialism, was retired early, and died in Rome in 1954). It was a difficult and frightening time. Maria went back to Berlin with Cornelia. There, with her parents' support, Maria lived in her own apartment, under a false name, having put Cornelia in one of the best schools in the city, where no one suspected her Jewish identity. Meanwhile her husband looked for a job and a place for them to emigrate. They hoped to go to England or the United States, but both places refused to allow refugees entrance unless they had sponsors who guaranteed they would provide permanent financial support. Otto did not know anyone: he needed a permanent job. Like so many exiles, he first went to England -- there he spent a year (1936-37) as Research Fellow at Durham University, at Newcastle-on-Tyne, and at the Warburg Institute in London, where he taught briefly. The following year he went to the United States. A Visiting Professorship at Vassar lasted a year, but when that ended he looked urgently for a permanent post. Finally, just in time, he was invited to teach at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. After a number of adventures, as the doors closed inexorably behind them, Maria and Cornelia left Germany to join him in the United States on September 3, 1939. Following his stint as Visiting Assistant Professor of Art and Archaeology at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., he settled down in his position (1941 to 1956) at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, "years he would recall only with affection." There he wrote, for a volume on Erotic Art published by the Kinsey Institute in 1970, the pioneering, influential article on Erotic art in Greco-Roman antiquity, which long embarrassed Maria with its success.

For two years, 1949-51, they were back in Rome, this time at the American Academy, he as a distinguished American scholar -- first with a Prix de Rome, then with a Fulbright Fellowship. There the beautiful, talented young Cornelia was courted by, and soon married another Fellow, Lucas Foss. Soon after, in 1956, Otto Brendel accepted the offer of a post as Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, and they moved to an apartment with a view of the Hudson, on Riverside Drive. The department, with Rudolf Wittkower as its energetic, imaginative chairman, was the best in the country. Professor and Mrs. Brendel entertained colleagues within and outside the department, Meyer Schapiro, William Dinsmoor, Edith Porada, Eve Harrison, etc., and the many foreign scholars who came through New York, Erika Simon, Janos Szilagyi, and many more. They kept in touch with Margarete Bieber, who had lost her post in Giessen because of the racial laws and had come to America in 1934; she had retired from Barnard, and lived near Columbia, on 113 Street. They faithfully attended the monthly meetings of the Archaeology Club, which met in members' locations in New York, Baltimore, and Princeton --members included Dorothy Hill of the Walters Art Gallery, Homer and Dorothy Thompson of the Institute for Advanced Study, Frances Follin Jones of the Princeton Art Gallery, Evelyn Harrison, and others. Otto Brendel founded the Classical Civilization Seminar, one of the first University Seminars, still active, bringing scholars from different disciplines together for lectures and discussions. He retired from Columbia in 1973, and died that same year, two days before his seventy-second birthday, in the midst of a brilliant career --he had just begun to teach a class on Roman painting at Princeton, and had been invited to give the Loeb lecture at Harvard.

With the death of her husband, whose career she had shared from the very beginning, there began a new phase in Maria's life. She set about making available a

number of his works, often described as "pioneering," or "seminal". Thus it was that she translated from German into English *The Symbolism of the Sphere* (Brill, 1977), and from English to German an article on "Iphigeneia in Tauris in Euripides and Goethe" (*Antike und Abendland* 27, 1981). She arranged for Emeline Richardson to complete *Etruscan Art*, on which he had been working at the time of his death (Pelican History of Art, 1978), and later for the bibliography, by Francesca Serra Ridgway, to update the second edition (Yale University Press, 1993). *The Visible Idea* (Washington, DC, 1980) included selected special studies. She was involved in the posthumous publication of the *Festschrift* in his honor --originally planned to celebrate his birthday -- advising on title, contents, contributors, and preface: *In Memoriam Otto J. Brendel. Essays in Archaeology and the Humanities*, edited by Helga von Heintze and Larissa Bonfante (Philipp von Zabern, Mainz, 1976).

In the summer, she would often go see their old friend Helga von Heintze in the Black Forest, or to a villa residence in Florence, where my husband and I saw her together with her husband one summer. During the last few years of her life, though her health no longer allowed her to travel, she continued to work on her husband's papers in their Riverside Drive apartment, and was a familiar, elegant figure in her neighborhood and at archaeological lectures at the Columbia Seminar. She corresponded with numerous friends in the US and abroad, and was close to her daughter Cornelia and her family, Lucas Foss, and her two grandchildren, Christopher and Eliza, of whom she was enormously proud. She was a fighter, and very much of a presence: she always maintained the carriage and tone of a stunningly beautiful woman and a lady. Her energy, physical and mental, saw her through the many difficulties and enormous changes her generation lived in and survived.

Bibliography

Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (translated from the German, Harper and Row, New York and Evanston, 1970) fig. 9, after p.200.

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