

## **Elisabeth Hermand, geborene Jagenburg**

A portrait of Jost Hermand that tries to do justice to his personal life beyond contemplating his amazing productivity as a scholar and teacher should include his marriage of sixty years. Elisabeth Hermand, née Jagenburg, was a wonderfully gifted yet shy woman who made her husband's energetic lifestyle between writing and traveling possible. As a friend of both since 1967, when he was a visiting professor and I a visiting lecturer at Harvard, I always found Elisabeth's presence most stimulating, as she made sure that Jost did not confine our conversation solely to academic topics. She instigated or allowed questions that were more inclusive, that is to say, more inclusive of one's actual life experience with its particular quandaries and non-academic rewards.

The cumbersome beginnings of Jost's career in Berlin and Marburg, as he sought in vain for an academic position, and then at the University of Wisconsin where he rose fast to prominence in the field of Germanics, were still present in our early conversations. It was at this time that I became aware of Elisabeth's role as a full partner in these endeavors. Indeed, as I learned later, while she was still Elisabeth Jagenburg she had actually lived in the art historian Richard Hamann's house in Marburg, and in 1955 arranged through his son, Richard Hamann-MacLean, that the grand old master of art history, already somewhat fragile, meet her fiancé Jost Hermand. The Hamann and Jagenburg families knew each other well. Elisabeth's father Paul Jagenburg, an entrepreneur whose company fell victim to the great Depression in 1932, had won political prominence as a National Bolshevik (which led to his incarceration from 1941 to 1945 in the concentration camp Buchenwald) and after 1945 as a Social Democrat in Bielefeld. Richard Hamann, likewise a fierce antifascist and still connected with the University of Marburg, was a professor at Berlin's Humboldt University and highly privileged within the East German academic hierarchy. The encounter between him and the young Hermand became part of family lore: having received Jost's Ph.D. dissertation in the evening, while Jost went to Kassel, Hamann read it overnight and cabled the next morning that he should return to Marburg and join him in the writing of the history of German culture since the founding of the Reich. Jost agreed immediately, married in Bielefeld, moved with Elisabeth to East Berlin and began writing the volume about Naturalism.

His writing gained impressive momentum but would not have been possible without Elisabeth. She took on the arduous task of providing the needed books and materials in Berlin's less than efficient library system. She helped Jost cope with the effects of his stuttering and the professional disappointments in West Germany after being expelled from the GDR in 1957, and shared in the daring venture of moving to an unknown place somewhere in America. This first decade of their partnership turned out to be the most gratifying for Elisabeth because she was able to work towards a common academic existence. And as far as I can judge, this common existence remained at the heart of their marriage, even when Jost became more and more absorbed by his success as a teacher and mentor of large numbers of students and as an increasingly prominent speaker at conferences all over the world.

Being the wife of Jost Hermand in a small midwestern university town was no easy life. Elisabeth, unprepared for American everyday culture and with little fluency in English, nonetheless was able to keep an open house for students and colleagues especially in the 1970s. Interest in ecological and feminist issues, developed since the 1960s, brought her in closer contact first with female graduate students who took

her under their wings, later with a number of professionals in the “green lobby” of the Wisconsin’s Environmental Decade.

Jost recognized her commitment to ecological issues—which also shaped their private lifestyle—by mentioning in his memoir *Zuhause und anderswo* (2001) that “Elisabeth Hermand,” calling her by her full name, decided to do unpaid voluntary work in the office of Wisconsin’s Environmental Decade in the 1980s. In view of her accommodation to and support of his privileged existence, it is somewhat unsettling that this is the only substantial information about life with her in Madison that he was to record. It might be that his personal stylization after his great mentor Richard Hamann, whose dedication to rigorous work and *Sachlichkeit*, to striving and struggling, which Jost described in moving terms in his memoir, carried him away from the very personal facts of his life with Elisabeth, or at least from an acknowledgement of her talents aside from her incredible patience and indulgence. I heard with sadness that she gave up playing the piano later in life and noticed that she withdrew from most contacts in town and university.

And yet, there are three areas where the partnership remained vivid and unhindered: first in the environmental awareness that Elisabeth brought into their life, contributing to Jost’s vigorous eco-criticism in the 1980s when few people were aware of impending environmental disasters and hardly believed that “green thinking” needed to include art and aesthetics. The other area is their life-long love for and exceptional knowledge of music (what Jost called “serious music”). Elisabeth, the pianist, experienced in classical music the presence of culture, “*Kultur*,” the anchor that enabled her to live an engrossed, thoughtful, though isolated life. All the more important were, thirdly, their joint travels, preferably to Germany, mostly Berlin, with its cultural offerings and the continuation of a tradition that had illuminated Elisabeth’s upbringing and difficult life as a young woman during National Socialism. She expressed her misgivings about the lack of *Kultur* in America with considerateness, grateful to those who maintained *Kultur* against all odds, not least in the German Department at Madison. The one time I saw both Jost and Elisabeth similarly happy, having just been fully immersed in *Kultur*, was in 1995 after they returned from a stay in Vienna where Jost had been a fellow in the IWK Forschungszentrum.

Elisabeth died a painful death of complications of pneumonia from the serious flu/brochitis that both she and Jost caught in January 2013, shattering Jost to the utmost. It was not long afterwards that he and I resumed a more active pursuit of our friendship with letters and visits.