

## Chapter 1

### Der Urgleit

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We are gathered here to reflect on the contributions of Henry and Lila Gleitman to education at Penn. You have already heard much—and will hear more—about these very considerable contributions from students and colleagues who have had the good fortune to work closely with the Gleitmans in recent decades. I think that the best way for me to make a nonredundant contribution to these proceedings is to capitalize on the fact that, with one probable exception, I have known Henry Gleitman far longer than has anyone else in this room. Thus my remarks are along the lines of a memoir of the early years of Henry Gleitman's academic career, the Swarthmore period. And in the spirit of those early years, I will entitle my talk "Der Urgleit."

In 1946, Henry went to Berkeley to start his graduate studies. He completed them in 1949, and in the same year, joined the faculty of Swarthmore College. Anyone who has spent even a day in Berkeley will appreciate the strength of character exhibited by our hero when he opted to leave that charmed city across the bay from San Francisco after only three years in order to take a teaching job in the Delaware Valley. So when I first met him a year later, in the fall of 1950, he could not have given more than a couple of the 100-odd psychology 1 courses he has taught to date. I had gone to Swarthmore to study at the feet of the then demigods of perception—Hans Wallach and Wolfgang Köhler. And I did just that, but, as it turned out, I actually spent far more time and probably learned vastly more from two other individuals I had never heard of before: one was Dick Neisser, my fellow Master's student, and the other was Henry Gleitman. Actually, it was much easier to study at the feet of Henry Gleitman than most people: You did not even have to sit on the floor to do that, for Henry in those days was fond of perching on any horizontal surface, particularly a radiator cover.

Henry was a phenomenon at Swarthmore in those days. With very few exceptions the Swarthmore faculty were solid, sensible, and serious—as befits the faculty of a college with strong Quaker traditions. So Henry could best be described as a sort of blue jay among brown owls:

He was vastly more colorful and louder. He was full of life, vitality, and many talents: He acted, he directed plays, he sang outrageous German translations of American ballads like “Frankie and Johnnie,” he was a gourmet cook, he was an excellent cartoonist. But above all he taught and he taught brilliantly. I don’t believe I actually heard him lecture at that time, but I did sit in on two of his honors learning seminars. They were without a doubt the most intensive, exhilarating, and exhausting intellectual experiences of my life; nothing before at Cornell or since at Cambridge, Harvard, or Penn came close to them. Each session of the seminars started right after dinner, and went on well into the night, lasting a good four or five hours. In those seminars we studied the writings of the great learning theorists of the era—Hull, Tolman, Guthrie, and their disciples. The word *studied* does not begin to capture the flavor of what we actually did. We read and reread, we analyzed, we dissected, we uncovered contradictions unsuspected by the original authors—or probably by anyone else in the entire galaxy. We designed crucial experiments, some *gedanken*, some involving complicated, balanced designs, requiring armies of rats, to be run on ingenious runways or alleys or Skinner boxes. This was serious business: We really wanted to get to the bottom of things. There were no shortcuts, no time limits, no hand waving. But it was also a lot of fun, with lots of laughter, and puns, and banter, and food, and drink, and above all, camaraderie.

One of the outgrowths of those famous Gleitman learning seminars was a *Psychology Review* paper, “The S-R Reinforcement Theory of Extinction” by Gleitman, Nachmias, and Neisser. It was to be the first of a series of papers intended to take apart the entire edifice of Hullian learning theory, postulate by postulate. While we were working on the extinction paper, word reached us that galley proofs of Hull’s latest book—*A Behavior System*—were available at Yale. The senior author of the GNN1 paper, as we called it, dispatched the two junior authors to look through the galleys to make sure that the latest version of Hullian theory was still subject to the criticisms we were making. Neisser and I traveled to New Haven by a mode of transportation alas no longer available to impoverished graduate students, namely, the thumb. When we got there, we discovered to our relief that the new book did not require us to change a line of our critique.

Five years after I left Swarthmore, I returned as an instructor, and Henry and I were now faculty colleagues. But he was still very much my teacher. When I organized my first learning seminar, the memory—as well as the extensive reading lists (updated)—of those legendary seminars led by Henry were my constant guides. But the most important thing I learned from Henry in that period was how to lecture—a skill that alas, I seem to have lost in recent years. I learned by coteaching

psychology 1 with him. Before then, I had never given a single lecture; my only prior teaching experience had been facing bored MIT undergraduates as recitation section leader for Bill McGill's introductory psychology course. And here I was teamed up with a man who already had a formidable reputation as a lecturer! Ours was not the usual arrangement, where the course is neatly subdivided between the coteachers. True, Henry had his lectures and I had mine, but because of his somewhat unpredictable commitments in New York at the time—he was a “cold warrior” working for Radio Free Europe—I had to be prepared to take over his lectures at a moment's notice. Fortunately, the course was tightly organized—we had prepared detailed outlines, which were strictly followed. Timing was everything: Each lecture was meant to last precisely one hour, and the goal was to finish the summary statement just as the bell rang. It was this level of organization that made it possible for Henry, arriving late from New York, to walk into the lecture hall, sit on the sidelines for a couple of minutes to make sure he knew exactly what point I had reached, and then take over from me without missing a beat.

Henry was not only my teacher and colleague at Swarthmore, but also my stage director. As a graduate student, I had bit parts in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and as an instructor I had a small talking part in Molière's *Imaginary Invalid*—yes, the faculty put on plays in those days at Swarthmore. Since Henry did not know how to do anything by halves, participation in a Gleitman production was approximately as time consuming as taking an honors seminar or teaching a course. There were numerous and protracted and quite spirited rehearsals; in fact, one rehearsal was so spirited that I managed to sprain my ankle. However, Henry did succeed in getting his odd assortment of actors to put on quite creditable and memorable productions.

There is much more that I could recount about those early years, but I hope that what I have said already helps to round out the picture of one of the two remarkable psychologists we are celebrating this weekend.