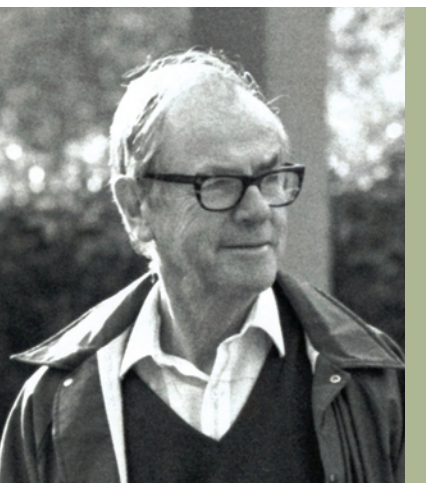


Intertwinings: Werner Warmbrunn

1920–2009

BY GOTTFRIED
PAASCHE '56



WERNER WARMBRUNN,
PUTNEY FACULTY MEMBER,
1944–47

Werner Warmbrunn, who taught at Putney for three years in the mid '40s, died on July 19 at his home in Claremont, California. He died at age 89, after a long illness.

Werner arrived at Putney in 1944, three years after landing on the New York docks. He was 24 years old and already had behind him hair-raising years in Germany and Holland. His German Jewish family left Frankfurt for Amsterdam in 1936. He completed his Abitur in Dutch, experienced the German occupation of Holland, and left Europe from Lisbon in 1941, after his family had already settled in upstate New York. He attended Cornell, and completed his B.A. before arriving at Putney to teach chemistry and German.

Putney was suggested to Werner by Curt Bondy, a charismatic and influential leader in the German Jewish Youth Movement. Bondy, when the time came, prepared young people for emigration to England and the U.S.A., and finally landed in the U.S. himself. It was his deep involvement with this Jewish Youth Movement that shaped Werner's early life. The Putney community of students and adults and the spirit with which it was infused was familiar to him, and becoming a part of it was, to him, "like coming home."

What Carmelita Hinton created in those first years of the school is well described in Susan M. Lloyd '52's, *The Putney School, A Progressive Experiment*. Young people were taken seriously and encouraged to take responsibility for their lives; teachers were recruited who showed promise of taking an active part in the Putney community. In her time at Bryn Mawr and later at Hull House, under the tutelage of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jane Addams, Carmelita grew to appreciate and cultivate an internationalist and social-activist perspective. She traveled in Europe, took an interest in what remained of the German Youth Movement, and sought out the experimental schools in Germany, those that had not already been closed by the Nazis. When it

came to teachers and staff, both in the first years of the school and in the years following World War II, she actively recruited Europeans. It was important to her to include in the Putney community a diversity of background, interests and education. On the isolated hilltop, Carmelita saw to it that Putney students would meet the world.

At Putney, Werner met and married a fellow teacher, Joan Strong '39, who has the distinction of being the first Putney graduate to then teach at Putney. Joan studied at Bennington, spent several years in war-related work in Washington, DC, and returned to Putney to teach English in 1945. Werner and Strong married in 1946, and in 1947 moved to Stanford, California, where Werner pursued graduate studies in International Relations and History. Joan taught, this time in the primary grades, at the Peninsula School. This school was founded in 1925 by a group of parents who had John Dewey very much on their minds. The leading spirit was Josephine Whitney Duvencek, a figure not unlike Carmelita Hinton.

In the fall of 1949, the Warmbrunns became co-directors of Peninsula. Together they introduced some of what they had found so attractive at Putney: giving students responsibility in the daily care of the school and in its governance, and class outings into the hills and mountains nearby, including a week of camping. They also recruited Putney teachers. The late 1940s were turbulent at Putney; it was the time of the faculty strike. Bruce Menefee, a young Reed graduate, union activist, and charismatic teacher, was one of their catches.

I joined the sixth grade at Peninsula in the late fall of 1949. Joan taught the class. I remember her teaching us to touch type in a room full of old typewriters, and within days I was part of a class play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. In the eighth grade, Bruce Menefee was my teacher. I was taught by two former Putney teachers in a school directed by one of these and another former Putney teacher, long before I had ever heard of Putney. How did this come about?

The Warmbrunns met my parents at Stanford. They too had left Nazi Germany in 1936, but for Japan. We were finally able to leave Japan in 1948 for the U.S.

What drew Werner to my mother was that she too, even though a member of the old German aristocracy and a daughter of the military, had been influenced by many of the ideals of the Youth Movement, and had forged an independent path during the years of the Weimar Republic. My father was the son of one of the great figures in that same movement, assassinated by the reactionary right in 1920. In addition, my mother was drawn to the Waldorf School movement in Germany and saw an echo of it in the Peninsula School. Peninsula School and its directors and teachers were very much to her liking.

Only a year and a half after landing on the docks of San Francisco in 1948, I found myself in a wonderful school, practically my first ever, since my earlier schooling in Japan had been haphazard and cobbled together. When I was enrolled in the first grade of a German community school, children threw stones at me because of who my parents were.

In my last year, Werner and Joan suggested that I apply to Putney. Who knew where Vermont was? I did what they told me. Werner and Joan more or less did all the rest, and convinced Carmelita that I was what the school was looking for. Werner knew how precarious our situation was in those years. He was concerned for my welfare. He knew that Putney would give me a stability and continuity of schooling that would surely have been lacking had I not gone to a boarding school. Looking back now, I see what good fortune it was for me that Werner, with his background and interests, came into my life just at that time. Many years later I found letters to my parents, indicating that Peninsula parents had helped to pay for my first year at Putney.

Werner visited me at Putney in my first year. I visited them once in their cabin in the forested hills above Stanford and heard, unforgettably, Lotte Lenya sing *Bertolt Brecht*. Werner also visited me several times while I was at Berkeley for my first year of university. It was only after decades of much living on his part and on mine that we met again, in 2002. I was shocked to

find how very German he was. He held himself like an oak tree, a familiar trait in his generation, spoke German to me and recited his favorite German poetry. Last fall I spent three days with him. He had warned me that he did not have much time left. He was then already in hospice care. He gave me his teenage journals to read, remarkable documents of his years in the Jewish Youth Movement. I read, fascinated, through the nights and talked with him about what I had read during the day. It was a wonderful completion for me to know him again in the last years and months of his life. It opened a window for me on a remarkable life story, of which I had been a small part many years ago.

When I came to Putney, notable Europeans were among the many remarkable teachers. Felix Lederer was my teacher and advisor for three of my four years, Marisa my supervisor in my library work job. Both were highly educated European refugees, seemingly so unsuited to teach teenagers, and yet both contributed mightily to the Putney of the post-war decades. Fernando Gerassi, who looked at me one day as we were walking into the KDU for Milk Lunch and told me it was time for me to shave, was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War. He was my art teacher. Together with his Russian wife, Steffa, they introduced generations of students to a taste of a European "salon." Maurice LeConte was my French teacher. He and his wife, Pat, were model Parisian intellectuals and set a high literary standard. Jeanne Case was a legend in French civility and taste, including culinary.

Felix and Marisa were also important at Putney in the lives of our children, Franz '79, Denise '81, and Sara '84. Felix was ecstatic when Franz, in his first year, supported the no-electronics rules for dormitories. I was pleased when Felix would sometimes call Franz "Gottfried." My last imagery of Marisa is her pleasure in attending the several seminars Sara and her husband, Michael, organized as part of their wedding on the Hill in 1994. In spite of her efforts to protect him, I sneaked in a visit with Felix, to his obvious pleasure.

Werner told me in my last visit to him that having had a hand in my life was one of the good things he had done in his life. I try to pass on his gifts to me to the people in my life.

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