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Obituary

OBITUARY:

IRENÄEUS EIBL-EIBESFELDT, FOUNDER OF HUMAN ETHOLOGY AND THE HUMAN ETHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVE, HAS DIED

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Two weeks before his 90th birthday, Irenäus (Renki) Eibl-Eibesfeldt has peacefully died in his house in Starnberg-Soecking, Bavaria, surrounded by his loved ones. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Eleonore (Lorle) Eibl-Eibesfeldt, his son, Dr. Bernolf Eibl-Eibesfeldt and his daughter Dr. Roswitha Eibl-Eibesfeldt, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Two weighty text books, compiled from a vast number of publications in books, scientific journals and from the results of his own research, several best sellers on topics of natural history and human ethology, also translated in many other languages than the original German, including Polish and Korean, approximately 600 publications in journals, scientific films, TV documentaries, interviews plus the world's largest film archive of non-staged social interactions among members of several traditional societies are the impressive legacy of this great scientist.

Son of a botanist father and an artist mother, he was born on June 15th 1928 in Döbling, a suburb of Vienna. His parents gave him the also then unusual name Irenäus, perhaps hoping that he would become, following his namesake, the Greek goddess Eirene, a peaceful inhabitant of our planet. Instead, Renki became somewhat of a scientific rebel, who fought for his often-provocative ideas, never swam with the current nor hung his flag according to the wind.

His father introduced him, from very early on, to the wonders of living organisms. The little boy was fascinated. When he was 11 years old, his father died. The death of a parent is a deep trauma for children; from an evolutionary point of view this is easy to understand: human offspring are dependent on their parents for an extended period of their lives. For Irenäus, the death of his beloved father was especially traumatic: his performance in school suffered dramatically, he often stayed away from classes and, instead, spend his time at ponds, rivers and in the forest, watching animals and their behavior. His sharp eyes and vivid interest in all swimming, crawling, flying, walking, jumping creatures made him the perfect ethologist he remained throughout his life, a scientist, who was not only interested in the overt phenomena of life but wanted to understand the underlying laws and structures governing all these wonders. This titanic power of synthesis has made him the famous, internationally recognized scholar who developed, after his career as animal ethologist, an evolutionarily inspired view of the human condition. His teachers at school must have realized that this boy was

special and allowed him to continue high school despite his many unexcused absences. He was transferred to a boarding school.

At age 15 he was drafted, like many of his classmates, as „Flakhelfer“, whose job was to help handle and fire the remaining German anti-aircraft artillery at the planes of the Allied Forces. A rough time, being involved in real war, living together with real soldiers. At capitulation, on the way home, he was spotted by a Soviet soldier who suspected him to be a member of the German Army, but allowed him to go, perhaps because Renki looked more a child than an adult man. At age 18 he began his study of zoology at Vienna University.

Konrad Lorenz came back as PoW in 1948. During that time he had written, without access to books and on sheets of paper cut from cement bags, the famous „Russian Manuscript“: the foundations of ethology. Renki and his later wife Eleonore (Lorle) came to his lectures at the make-shift biological station on Wilhelminenberg, one of the hills of Vienna, where Otto Koenig had started classes on behavioral biology. Wolfgang Schleidt, Flakhelfer comrade and life-long friend, had informed Renki about Koenig who occupied the old sheds there by putting up a sign „Research Station“. In the chaos after the war, this created facts: The Forschungsstation Wilheminenberg is still functioning.

In 1951 Konrad Lorenz was made director of the Research Unit Comparative Ethology, an out-post of the Max Planck Institute for Marine Research. Renki, Lorle (married in the meantime), Wolfgang Schleidt, Margaret Zimmer (later Schleidt) and Beatrice Oehler (later Lorenz) were among the team around Lorenz. They lived and worked in the bowling alley and some other rooms of the Water Castle Buldern in Westfalia, whose owner was the physically and socially mighty Baron Romberg, who invited the young, somewhat undernourished scientists to join him at public feasts, like Christmas and Easter. The ethologists had to take turns because they could not keep up with the pace and quantity of Herrn Romberg's drinking.

In 1957, Erich von Holst and Konrad Lorenz received the offer of the Max Planck Society to be the founding directors of the newly established

Max Planck Institute for Behavioral Physiology in Seewiesen, south of Munich. Renki and the others came along. The institute soon became famous throughout the world and was instrumental in putting ethology on the map. Many colleagues from the United States and other countries who had been behaviorists in the lines of Skinner flocked in to learn about the new paradigm. Evolutionary biology widely replaced behaviorism as the science explaining how and why animals behave the way they do. Konrad, Renki and the others were brilliant zoologists, this enabled them to pursue a holistic observational organismic approach, the hallmark of European ethology, to understand evolved traits of the different species. 1973 Konrad Lorenz received the Nobel Prize (together with Nico Tinbergen and Max von Frisch) for his work on imprinting.

Hans Hass, one of the founders of marine biology and pioneer of scuba diving, invited Renki to join the team of zoologists on board the “Xarifa”, a sailing ship equipped for underwater research in various oceans of the world. Landlubber Renki soon became an athletic swimmer, diver and discoverer of the symbiosis of cleaners and cleaned fish as well as many other behavior patterns of marine animals. To snorkel with him in the coral reef off Tauwema Village, Kaileuna Island in the Trobriand Archipelago or near one of the Micronesian Islands was a fascinating eye-opener. He knew all the details of the bustle of creatures down there, all their names, their behavior and relationships. Without any doubt he would have been a splendid director of a leading marine biology institute somewhere in the world.

Back in Seewiesen, Renki soon conquered a place in the front row of ethologists. His acute, unbiased observations showed, for instance, that naïve rats, raised without contact to conspecifics, display species-specific nest building. He argued that play behavior, a very important means for animals to test out new behavior patterns could only develop when, in the course of evolution, decoupling of behavior from primary instincts became possible. In a kind of counter-hypothesis to Lorenz’ stressing aggression as being part of human nature, Renki argued that love between adults, typical for our species, could only come into being once individual

parental care had been “invented” by nature: a “magic moment of evolution” as he coined it. In 1961 he spent some time at the University of Chicago, where he learned English. He could not hide his Viennese accent, but had a large vocabulary in the lingua franca of our times. He generally had an amazing memory, could quote, without any mistakes, pages over pages e.g. from Goethe’s “Faust”, perhaps the most powerful poem-drama in German language.

Already 1967 his textbook of ethology (English version “Ethology. The Biology of Behavior”), the first one in that time, was published by Piper Verlag; over 500 pages filled with details of relevant research around the world and of his own discoveries. It has been translated into many other languages and was revised by him several times. He was “driven”, as Frank Salter rightly describes him, by the quest for knowledge and spreading it. We call this book “The Old Testament”, as in 1984 his second massive text book appeared, it’s English title is “Human Ethology. Foundations of Human Behavior”, the “New Testament”, also in Piper publishing house, almost 1,000 pages thick and also translated into many languages. These two massive, scholarly written volumes secured him a place as one of the leading evolutionary scientists.

He demonstrated, that children, who were born deaf and blind due to rubella infection of their mothers during pregnancy, displayed the same facial expressions of joy, sadness, despair and others as seeing children even though they lived in eternal darkness and silence and could not have learned about making the appropriate faces in specific situations. Darwin had gathered information about children born blind from the director of an institution for such children in London, and came to the same conclusion. Renki’s proof was stronger, as he filmed the children and had excluded the possibility that their mothers or other persons could have informed them, verbally, about specific facial expressions, e.g. by commenting “Oh, you smile so nicely, are you happy?” It was proven, this way, that the system connecting the limbic system with the facial muscles does not need input from outside, it is primarily independent of learning and culture.

Advised and accompanied by his fatherly friend Hans Hass he began his new career as human ethologist. The two biologists realized that people in different societies of the world displayed very similar, often identical behavior. These universals could not be explained on the grounds of ecology. Darwin had, while preparing his important book “The expression of the emotions in man and animals”, 1872, conducted what was probably the first international cross-cultural questionnaire study by writing to missionaries, public servants, traders etc. in the then global English Empire to inquire about the universality of non-verbal behavior. International jet travel and the new 90° lens for film cameras which Hans and Renki had developed, enabled them to conduct a systematic study of behavior in different cultures. The mirror lens made people unaware that they were filmed... at least for some time, as most of them soon found out that he was not filming, for hours, the forest where nothing happened, but e.g. the interactions going on in front of a house nearby.

The ethnographic and folklore institutes were filled with films documenting the making and using of tools, of houses, baking bread, dancing etc. The two biologists took a different approach. They were after the micro events during social interactions which had largely escaped the attention of researchers, partly because it is much more difficult to sit and wait for something relevant to happen. In a way, Renki's approach always was that of a classic animal ethologist, who observes behavior and does not interact with the animals. He strategically selected five “model cultures”: the Yanomami of the Upper Orinoko in Venezuela (hunters, gatherers, horticulturists); the Kalahari San of Botswana and Namibia (hunters, gatherers); the Himba of Namibia (cattle breeders); the Eipo of the Highlands of West- (Indonesian) New Guinea (horticulturists, hunters, gatherers) and the Trobriand Islanders of the Solomon Sea in Papua New Guinea (horticulturists, users of marine resources). For each society he selected usually younger colleagues who had worked in the respective area for an extended time and knew the language and the culture well. This way, the distanced observation via film camera and ethnographic and linguistic expertise were combined. A good mixture.

Renki knew that we were entering the terrain of disciplines like ethnography and empirical sociology, which hitherto had had the monopoly of gathering data from human societies and had usually explained behavior on the grounds of the respective cultural environment. Now an ethologist arrived on the scene, his “Arriflex” camera in the hand and Darwin, Lorenz and the other founding fathers of evolutionary biology in the brain. Poaching, as it were, in the front gardens of the arts and humanities. And discovering things, which had remained unnoticed so far. Like the “eyebrow flash”, a fast lift of the eyebrows, signalling that the sender is open for social communication with the receiver, a “yes” to social contact. Or the juxtaposition of aggressive (martial behavior, brandishing weapons) and submissive (children dancing and strewing flowers) signals in the possibly critical situation of two groups meeting after some time, plus many more such behavioral patterns found in many cultures. All scenes were carefully written down in a protocol. Renki knew that he would be judged by his ethology colleagues on the grounds of correct gathering of behavioral data. He had first learned this from his first teacher in ethology, Otto Koenig. These were the beginnings of creating the human ethology film archive which consists mainly of non-staged scenes of social interactions plus footage shot in the classic style of ethnographic documenting, e.g. just filming what happened, no stage direction.

Over decades he kept working, always with the best available 16 mm film technology, in later years using quartz-governed time codes for tape recorder and camera to have lip-synchronous sound and an easier way of producing the final film units; in the last years he used video cameras. All of the societies in which he gathered data and footage have been subject to often dramatic acculturation. Some are more or less destroyed by the impact of the modern world with alcohol, unemployment and lawlessness. The films contained in the human ethological film archive are therefore irretrievable documents of times gone by. Some cultures, like that of the Eipo in West New Guinea, have been able to manage a rather smooth transition from stone age to computer. Renki carried out

his demanding fieldwork with unfaltering enthusiasm, despite heat, tropical rain, attacks of insects, bacteria and planes losing their engine power or actually crashing on one of the tiny airstrips in New Guinea. He described the human condition in a way very different from what was, in the 60s and 70s, the prevailing paradigm, namely as one of the animals, equipped with programmed behavior producing cultural invariance rather than cultural specificity. In the meantime, partly driven by the advances of neurobiology and genetics, the wheel of science has turned in his direction - apart from some still surviving postmodern deconstructivist positions. Many findings which he and members of his team in first Percha, then Seewiesen, then the fabulous castle in Erling-Andechs (where Jürgen Aschof had previously conducted his pioneering chronobiological research) and at the end in Seewiesen again, have been confirmed by others and turn up, often in new dress, in science magazines around the world. Together with Christa Sütterlin, his congenial partner, he wrote “Weltsprache Kunst” (2007, second edition 2008), a large, well-illustrated book on visual communication and the ethology of art. It was his last opus magnum.

When Edward O. Wilson’s “Sociobiology. The new synthesis” appeared in 1975, he perceived the theory-driven predictions and the mathematical way of analysis with interest, but argued that European-type ethology, i.e. gathering organismic real-life data by careful observation and the new brand of evolutionary science should co-exist side by side and fertilize each other, a position similar to that of colleagues in the Netherlands, another cradle of ethology with Groningen University conducting a yearly, very well frequented course in human ethology. Gerhard Medicus and myself are giving human ethology classes at the University of Innsbruck for almost 30 years. Renki always viewed group selection as one possible way of genetic transmission. He was strongly criticized for that, also in his home institute in Seewiesen, but recent advances in evolutionary biology, e.g. by E. O. Wilson and Bert Hölldobler, have demonstrated that this principle exists in nature and work e.g. by Boyd and Richerson has shown group selection to be also

working in the human species. Renki had an acute sense for the many avenues organic life can take. In 1979 he published a target article in “Behavioral and Brain Sciences”, which was commented upon, mostly in positive ways, by many well-known colleagues. He was the founding president of our International Society for Human Ethology and kept that position for many years. The Ludwig-Boltzmann-Society made him (1992) director of the newly founded “Institute for Urban Ethology” in Vienna; Karl Grammer had the position of local director until the closure of the institute in 2009.

He did not shy away from political debates. Many of his colleagues held this against him, saying, an evolutionary biologist should stay with his science and not make his opinions about life in a modern society public. He argued that scholars of other disciplines also raised their voices and that discourse in a pluralistic modern society needed input from all sides. His hypothesis that xenophobia is based in the early childhood, when toddlers are starting to react with fear against strangers has so far not been corroborated, perhaps advances in neurobiology and brain imaging will one day be able to verify or falsify this claim. But his statements that a society can only absorb a certain amount of newcomers of different cultural backgrounds, that it can only function if there is a good degree of solidarity among its members and that not respecting these biopsychic principles will let voters turn to right-wing political parties is more relevant now in countries like Germany than he probably ever expected.

The Human Ethological Film Archive of the Max Planck Society is now housed in the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural Museum in Frankfurt; there could be no better place for it. It consists of approximately 300 km footage, mainly from the five model cultures described above, and of approximately 100 km of footage on behavior of chimpanzees in Gombe, originating from the work of Hugo van Lawick-Goodall and Renki’s own filming there. One needs more than 40 days continuous viewing to see everything. Some of the societies were visited for many decades and still today work together with human ethologists: a

long-time documentation very rarely achieved in other projects. This scientific treasure will be made available for international research in future. The universality of human perception, emotions, thought and behavior is well apparent in these documents. This universality is connecting our species.

A complete copy of the many published films from the Eipo culture has been integrated into the Cultural Center (“Center Budaya”) in the Eipomek Valley in the formerly isolated Star Mountains of the Indonesian Province of Papua; this center was built with funds from the German Foreign Office in Berlin and from the local government. It was officially inaugurated on July 4th 2014, exactly 40 years after the arrival of the first team of researchers of the project “Humans, Culture and Environment in the Central Mountains of Irian Jaya (West-New Guinea)” funded by the German Research Foundation. In 2008 we showed the Eipo some of the films made in the mid 70s. The young people were especially fascinated, they had never seen many of the ceremonies and customs portrayed there. The elders said: “You know, we have no history, nothing written about our past, no pictures, no photographs or films. You have documented our lives before we became Christians in 1980 and changed many things in our culture. Can you give us copies of these documents?” In the Cultural Center they can now view all the books and many of the publications written about them, many pictures from the past and films showing the festive and the every-day aspects of their former lives. They are proud to have, as the only local ethnic group in Western New Guinea, some of their history back. “A tree needs roots, otherwise it will fall. Show your people the films from us!”

The first steps to having the human ethological film archive declared a UNESCO World Document have been undertaken and if successful, Renki’s lifelong work would thereby achieve a new dimension.