

THERE WERE GIANTS

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It was a summer day in Israel; and Ernie, professor of archaeology and cuneiform philology, was supervising excavation of a section of field on top of an ancient city mound. The sun overhead burned hotly, scorchingly it seemed, over Ernie and the barren landscape. No surprise, Ernie laughed to himself, there is an ancient bond between this place and the burning Sun, for the valley of Ajalon could be seen in the distance. It was there that Joshua fought a great battle and the Bible recounts how “the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day.”¹

Ernie’s musing was interrupted by shouts from the crew working below in the trench: “Bones” they shouted; “look at the bones!” The workers carefully removed several large bones from the tawny soil. Fortunately Dr. Robinson, a physician and amateur archaeologist, was present on the site; he was immediately summoned to look at the long bones. The doctor did so and proclaimed them to be the bones of cattle or perhaps donkeys. He removed them for further study. There had much digging to do that summer and a great deal of labor had been needed to open the field. So the director of the excavation hired some of the Bedouin men who had camped nearby to assist with the digging. One of the Bedouin men was working for Ernie; and after the doctor left, the grizzled Bedouin told Ernie in a mixture of broken Hebrew and Arabic: “The doctor is mistaken; these are not the bones of animals; they are the bones of ancient humans. Our forefathers were bigger than we are today; we are small; but they were large.” Ernie did not reply but thought again of the Bible; was it not also written: “There were giants on the earth in those days... they were the mighty men which were of old, men of renown.”²

Later that evening, under the starlit sky—for the sun eventually did go down—Ernie relaxed in a chair, thinking about giants. He of course did not believe in physical giants;

¹ Joshua 10:13

² Gen. 6:4 (KJV).

but wasn't it true, he thought, that as children we are surrounded by larger adults. These adults might indeed look like giants to small children. And, similarly, even later, might not young students attending university, when they encounter the thoughts and minds of great teachers, feel that they are again in the presence of giants?

There was certainly one professor with whom Ernie had studied who had seemed to him like one of those giants—Professor Sigmund Alzheimer, an intellectual pioneer and teacher of Ernie's own teachers! Ernie had once asked Professor Alzheimer how he thought it was possible for him to have made so many remarkable discoveries. Alzheimer had told him: "The field was young and so was I; it was like the "gold rush" days; the nuggets were just waiting on the ground and I picked them up." Alzheimer was over sixty years old when he came to America, invited at last by the university department with whom he had collaborated for over thirty years. They needed him to launch the great cuneiform dictionary which should have been completed decades earlier but there were delays, diverting projects, World War II. But now, a new cadre of refugee scholars had emigrated to America; they were ambitious and single-minded. They wanted to produce the dictionary; and Alzheimer was a scholar that they absolutely needed on their editorial board.

Alzheimer was also a refugee—twice in fact; he had held the important chair at the university of Berlin; he was editor of the famous journal published by the German Near Eastern Archaeological Society; during the pre-war years he had trained a generation of leading scholars who, after the war, rebuilt the discipline of ancient philology in centers like Berlin, Vienna, Heidelberg, Giessen, Leipzig, Leiden. Alzheimer boasted to Ernie that no chair was appointed in Europe without consulting him first. But Alzheimer also had a mischievous and wicked sense of humor. For his own special field of study he could be cruelly critical and "picky;" but for a related field, as he told Ernie, he allowed one applicant to write his own letter and then give it to Alzheimer to sign and Alzheimer did so without even reading it. Three years after the Nazis came to power, Alzheimer, as a Jew, was stripped of his position even though he was a veteran and had been awarded the Iron Cross in World War I. His battle experience had been brief. As a newly

commissioned officer he was required to unsheathe his sword and lead his unit forward—which he courageously did. “I took out my sword, pointed it and shouted ‘Forward for God, for the Fatherland, and for the Kaiser’” The next thing he remembered was his waking up bandaged in a hospital bed. “Yes, yes,” said Altheimer “I gave my blood for the Kaiser but when I left Germany I did not keep my Iron Cross.” He told Ernie that he wanted to come to the university in America in 1936; but there was still a depression going on; and at an international meeting in Rome the American dean informed him that there simply was no money even to hire a great scholar like Altheimer. For the meeting in Rome Altheimer had prepared a groundbreaking paper that was translated into many languages; and even today, some seventy years later, is still being quoted. “I was desperate” recounted Altheimer, “and would have come for even ten dollars a year; I thought then that it was anti-Semitism but I learned later that the depression was severe—even in America.” Ernie knew this too; for another, somewhat younger American born professor at the university had told him how he, not yet being tenured, was “furloughed” during the depression; and how he had to support himself and his family by taking a job in a steel mill for several years until the university could rehire him.

But just at this point in time, as Altheimer told the story, he was dating a gypsy woman who made her living as a fortune-teller. One night she read the tea leaves for him and proclaimed “something good is going to happen for you.” And indeed this is how it worked out. That very week he received an invitation to come to Turkey and start a new department at the University of Istanbul. Ataturk, the first president of Turkey, was deeply interested in importing western science and culture. Ataturk saw Hitler’s refugees as an opportunity for Turkey and so Altheimer, being a refugee, was happy to go to Istanbul and, as he told Ernie: “What’s more, I was being paid a salary even higher than what I received as a full professor in Berlin.” Altheimer was given permission to invite a number of his students to continue their studies with him in Turkey; quite a few joined him; they were either Jewish, married to Jews, or had a Jewish ancestor that made them subject to Nazi racist laws. Altheimer also trained a generation of Turkish students but, as he admitted, “Turkey at best was not Europe or America; it was still somewhat primitive;

and I frankly did not enjoy the hot climate.” And so when America finally called, Altheimer emigrated.

The department at the American university tried to make a big deal of it when Altheimer came; they also wanted to justify their hiring a scholar who was already so near to the age of mandatory retirement at the university. So they arranged for Altheimer to have dinner with the President of the University, along with a number of other luminaries. Here again, Altheimer was playful and idiosyncratic. As he told Ernie, the President, wanting to make conversation first asked him “ Professor Altheimer, I understand that you are a great linguist.” Altheimer replied, “No, no no, I couldn’t really say that.” The President tried again: “But surely you are a noted philologist?” Again Altheimer replied “No no, that is saying too much.” Finally flabbergasted, the President asked” Well, how would you describe yourself?” Altheimer replied, “You might say I am a kind of lexicographer.” Ernie was remembering that although Altheimer was a giant of a scholar, he was also a person who did not want to fit into the usual or conventional mode. When the university hired him, the dean suggested to Altheimer that he try and save some money out of his salary to invest for his old age. But Altheimer told him” I saved a lot of money in Berlin and even bought an apartment building; first I lost it to the Nazis and now it is located in the Soviet zone; so what do I have to show for it?” And so he was determined to spend all of his money and live. He at this time also received some reparation money from the West German government to make up for his lost wages and pension from the university in Berlin. So Altheimer did not intend to live frugally.

He was the only professor in the department who came to the university in a taxi; he also went home in a taxi. He would call the taxi company and simply say “Luigi, Altheimer” and Luigi would faithfully come at any time—day or night-- to transport his favorite customer. Altheimer had no time to shop for food so he ordered everything from a tony downtown department store. What he could not find locally, he ordered from the Caviarteria, a New York Park Avenue emporium which even today is described on the web as an “upscale café in the Hotel Delmonico which caters to those who enjoy indulging in opulent food, serving super expensive favorites like its cavier sampler and

French truffled foie gras.” Alzheimer especially had a craving for such foods, as well as for various herrings and pickled fish from central and northern Europe, which reminded him of his youth in Bohemia. He hired a housekeeper, Carlotta, to cook for him; she did so abysmally so he told Ernie, “but I keep her anyway.” After supper, they would play cards together and Alzheimer reported that she also cheated since they played for money. When he went to the washroom, she would peek at his cards and rearrange the deck. This tolerant account led Ernie to suspect that Carlotta was supplying Alzheimer with more than just inferior cooking.

Alzheimer never married. He liked women but only when he needed them. Ernie was married and from time to time he would invite Prof. Alzheimer to have dinner with him and his wife. Alzheimer at such moments grew nostalgic about his boyhood home in Bohemia and the family gathering for well-cooked meals. His father owned a small factory and was a leading figure in the community; he was president of his Temple and, with his beautiful baritone voice, sang in the choir. Alzheimer said that he had himself felt stirrings of religious fervor for a time when he was young but later on gave up all religious practice. But, at the same time, he proudly stated that he had achieved his professor’s chair at Berlin without converting to Christianity, as other Jewish professors had felt compelled to do. Ernie’s wife would prepare traditional Jewish specialties, especially soups and stews. These Alzheimer enjoyed but at the same time he insisted that Ernie had to serve him quality beer, which he drank in abundance. He instructed Ernie to look for specific brands from the region of Pilsen; if these were not available, Alzheimer would accept German or Danish beer but not, God forbid, Budweiser of St. Louis, which Alzheimer related that he was once forced to drink while he was attending a meeting in the South and had no other choice. Alzheimer was a connoisseur of brewing and in one of his important publications he had pieced together and published ancient texts dealing with brewing beer and recipes. He confided to Ernie that the ancient beer would not compare with modern beers because “they had no knowledge of adding hops!” During the day, Alzheimer drank hot milk from a thermos. But after work he relaxed and wanted beer—and later some whiskey or brandy. Warmed by food and drink, Alzheimer would recount stories of his youth and past life. It was through many such evenings that Ernie

had learned an abundance of intimate facts about Altheimer's personal and professional life, concerning which Altheimer, became increasingly uninhibited as the evening wore on and would conceal no details. Ernie remembered how on one of Altheimer's visits, he called for his taxi, then walked outside of Ernie's apartment to wait. It was summertime and without air-conditioning. The windows of Ernie's first floor apartment were wide open and Ernie was horrified to hear Altheimer bidding the taxi to wait and taking time to urinate against the wall of the apartment building before riding home.

Back at the dig, under a star-studded sky, Ernie roused himself from his reverie. He, too, had to urinate and it was time for him to go to bed. As he stood up, Ernie remembered another biblical passage about giants. The Bible relates how spies were sent out from the Wilderness by Moses in order to scrutinize the Promised Land. Moses was disappointed because a majority of the spies rendered a fearful report saying: "all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and in our own eyes we were as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes."³ It is interesting, thought Ernie, that these spies made assumptions—not only on how they saw the other men as giants but also how they imagined the alleged giants looked back upon them! To Ernie, this story seemed to be more about psychological attitude rather than physical attributes. In other words, how we look at ourselves and imagine how others see us. As for Professor Altheimer, Ernie still thought of him as a giant, but then there came a day when Ernie discovered that Altheimer did not always see himself as a giant.

Ernie and Altheimer shared the same physician, Dr. Bernhard Isaacs. Dr. Isaac's wife Adele had a deep interest in archaeology and she and Ernie had taken a number of classes together at the university. They became good friends. Adele and Dr. Isaacs also regularly invited Professor Altheimer to dinner, especially after his heart attack. Adele wanted to be sure that he was not solely dependent for nourishment upon his incompetent cook Carlotta. One summer night Ernie had been invited to have dinner with the Isaacs and Professor Altheimer. The professor was in great form, telling many stories and very much

³ Cf. Numbers 13:31-33 (KJV).

enjoying his food and drink. It was late when the evening was over and Dr. Isaacs asked Ernie to accompany Professor Altheimer home. He lived close by—too near to call his taxi; he would walk; however, he was unsteady on his feet. So Ernie walked the Professor home and brought him into his apartment. It was the first time that Ernie had been there. The apartment was spare and minimally furnished. Altheimer kept his books at the university; so there was only one book to be seen on a small end table next to the sofa; it was the Hebrew Bible. Ernie waited while Professor Altheimer got undressed and then came into the bedroom to be sure Altheimer was ready for bed. Altheimer had sent Ernie into the kitchen to pour and bring him a small glass of whiskey from the cupboard. Ernie entered the bedroom and was surprised to see a large framed black and white photograph over the bed. It was of a handsome man, dressed in a suit and holding a cigar. He asked who it was and Altheimer told him it was a photograph of his father and hastily bade Ernie good night and thanked him for helping him home.

Even now, at a remove of many years, Ernie still recalled how startled he was when he saw the large photo of Altheimer's father. It was the only picture in the apartment and how large and brooding it seemed as it hovered over Altheimer's bed. How strange, thought Ernie, for this large photo to hang in a bedroom? Altheimer had told Ernie how often his father had scolded him; Altheimer's progress in academe had been slow; his father complained that his son had chosen a "brotlos" profession—no "bread" or income to speak of. The father had wanted Altheimer-- his only son-- to follow him into the business; it was a successful enterprise; and the family was prosperous. Beyond this, Prof. Altheimer himself recounted how he spent money carelessly and, although studious and serious when he was working, spent his leisure time with a fast and non-intellectual crowd. Even after gaining his first position at the University of Berlin, he attended faculty meetings in a lackadaisical fashion, reading the racing form behind the formal pages of meeting agenda. Nor were his sexual adventures fully concealed from public scrutiny. Ernie knew another refugee professor from Germany who told Ernie how splendid it was for Ernie to have studied with a noted and brilliant scholar like Altheimer. However, "back in Germany, Altheimer was not welcomed into respectable, bourgeois society." He was known to be an "Apronjaeger"—a "skirt chaser." Altheimer himself had

indeed once protested to Ernie that he never trifled with married women—unless of course, he added with a wink, they were willing.

Alzheimer's family, unable to appreciate and recognize the extent of his brilliant scholarship, did not regard him with deep respect. At a party for his 75th birthday, his older sister Renata and her son Herman, who had somehow escaped Hitler by fleeing to England, came to America to celebrate the event. The party was arranged by Dr. and Mrs. Isaacs and Ernie and his wife were invited. It was surprising to see how Alzheimer's sister spoke to him; she cajoled and spoke to him with impatience. Even Herman, his nephew, chose to recount with great humor how clumsy Alzheimer had looked when he came home in his officer's uniform and sword prior to his being wounded at the front in eastern Europe. "He kept tripping on his sword which was getting tangled in his legs."

Alzheimer's father had died before he was appointed to the professor's chair at Berlin. He never lived to see his son's great success and international recognition. And his sister Renata and nephew Herman, living in Bohemia, retained their more vivid memories of his confused and disorderly youth.

Ernie thought again back to the Bedouin man and his assertion that we who are now alive are smaller in stature than those who came before us. Was it possible, thought Ernie, for sons to grow up and feel that they stand as tall as their fathers? Or do we always believe that once upon a time, "there were giants on the earth?" Alzheimer's father, who had supported and maintained him during years of impecuniosity, never had the opportunity to see his son's success and fame. Yes, Alzheimer himself became a giant; but he yearned to prove to his father that he was not anymore to be regarded as a grasshopper in his father's eyes. Alzheimer's father had died too soon; only his father's photograph remained, along with an abiding sadness—or was it perhaps hope—that one day Alzheimer and his father would yet come to a point of understanding and resolution.