

Robert Jungk - An Appreciation

Richard Slaughter

I first met Bob Jungk at a World Future Society meeting in the US during the early 1980s. From then on I would meet him repeatedly in different cities around the world every year or two. There are several particularly strong memories. One was in New York when corporate futurist Ted Gordon had just spoken about professional futures techniques. Bob took the platform looking thunderous. He proceeded to declare in his strong German accent how he must have caught the wrong plane; that futures was not about placing tools in the hands of the already powerful, but about asserting our common humanity. In 1988 we walked on the Great Wall of China together with other friends and colleagues from the World Futures Studies Federation who were attending the Beijing conference. As time went by I increasingly felt that he was my 'spiritual father' in the futures field, not least because he was adamant that the human spirit should not bow down to technology or power in any guise. He had good reason to take this view.

In 1990 the World Future Society held a meeting in conjunction with Bob and the Robert Jungk Futures Library in Salzburg, Austria. I met him there one evening for a personal, late night tour of the library. I don't remember what we talked about. But I do remember feeling that I was in a very special place with one of the great figures of our time. His wife and son also made me feel welcome in Salzburg, insisting that I join their table for dinner. I last saw him in Barcelona in 1991, where he was much in demand. There was even a film crew buzzing around him. However, he graciously spared me time to conduct my *21C* interview - part of which we did while walking from one part of the conference venue to another. Later, having seen the result, he wrote me a rare letter saying how it did him 'too much honour.'

Bob was much missed at the WFSF Turku conference in 1993, where a day was held in his honour. He died on July 14, 1994 at the age of 81, following a stroke. In my book, *The Foresight Principle*, I wrote about his library in Salzburg, knowing that he might not live to see the reference. However, as I also made clear, the work he started goes on with Peter Kron, Werner Riemer, Walter Spielmann in Salzburg, Peter Moll in Wuppertal and many others. Spielmann is already writing a chapter for a forthcoming anthology on the legacy of Bob Jungk. So clearly his hope and passion that together we can build a better future continues through the work of those who knew him and worked with him. He was never bitter. Near the end he reminded his friends that 'whatever happens, remember that I have had a happy and fulfilled life.' It was not always so.

When Hitler came to power Bob Jungk was a nineteen-year-old student in Berlin. Following the Reichstag fire he was arrested for anti-Nazi activities and deprived of

his citizenship. With luck and the help of friends he was released, went to the Sorbonne in Paris, but later returned illegally to Germany to work for a subversive press-service. Before long he was forced to flee to Czechoslovakia. The fall of Prague took him to Paris and the fall of Paris to Switzerland. Even here he was again jailed for his outspoken condemnation of the Nazis. After the war he returned to Germany, took a degree at Zurich and travelled widely.

From that time on, Jungk set his hand against oppression in all its forms. By 1952 he completed *Tomorrow is Already Here*, a book highly critical of the emerging uses of advanced technology in America. But the focus of his subsequent work turned upon a trip to Hiroshima in the early 50's. It was here that he met a number of people who were dying of radiation sickness. The major themes of his life's work were forcefully impressed upon him: the power and potential destructiveness of modern technologies, the corresponding need for careful foresight and the constant struggle to preserve human qualities in the brave new post-war world.

At the end of his career he had a long view back over the 20th century and had been close to many of its momentous events. From this rich experience emerged a sense of perspective which tells us much about the deep trends, the ways things are going. His critique is matched only by his constant inventiveness and dedication to people. He never attempted future predictions. He understood that the future is constantly created by asking the right questions and helping people and organizations to make careful, long-term choices.

His work seems to fall into perhaps three broad phases. First was the painstaking research on nuclear issues, both military and civil, emerging in books like *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns* and *The Nuclear State*. There followed a later period spent looking for, and developing, ways of responding to the challenge. This produced *The Everyman Project* and, much later, *Futures Workshops*. During this time he was one of the founders of the World Futures Studies Federation. He was instrumental in creating the London-based Institute for Social Inventions, now a well-established seedbed for innovative ideas.

In later years Bob Jungk became a kind of 'elder statesman' of the futures field, and an inspiration both to fellow futurists and many other people. In the late 80's he persuaded the city of Salzburg in Austria to support the establishment of the Robert Jungk International Futures Library. Here, in elegant rooms overlooking the fast, grey river that bisects Salzburg, he founded one of the great repositories of futures material in the world. He later ran for president of Austria and suffered much personal abuse.

Over the years, Jungk continued to think, write, speak and travel. It was he who spotted the need for institutions of foresight back in the 70's. He was one of the earliest to draw attention to the important distinctions between what he called 'the logical, critical and creative imagination' in futures work. He did as much as any, and more than most, to identify the central dangers of this most dangerous of centuries. But he did not merely diagnose, become angry, nor rail helplessly against vast and impersonal forces. Rather, he pursued a wide variety of individual, institutional and community responses, and with no little success. It is therefore no exaggeration to describe him as a kind of 'one-man revolution.' That, indeed, was the title of the interview I conducted with him in Barcelona, and later published in the Winter 1992 issue of *21C*. Given all this, he exemplified a central principle of futures work: 'don't wait for the future to happen; look ahead, evaluate what you see, and act now from the highest motives you can muster'.

While writing his autobiography, Bob Jungk looked back over his life to consider the key insights. He told me that the most important thing is to never give up. 'In many ways these days people give up too early. They just give up. But my main experience is that one should never resign. One should always stand up again. My earliest toy was a little plaything, Stehaufmensch, we call it in German. It has a round bottom which makes it easy to push over. The figure falls and then promptly gets up again. That's the story of my life. Whenever I have been pushed down it has weakened me because it took away the old securities, but it also strengthened me, because it gave me new opportunities. In fact I have to 'thank' Hitler in a certain sense because otherwise I would have been a provincial German. He threw me out of Germany; I had to go into the world. As a result of Hitler I became a planetary citizen. So I feel that every negative event can be an opportunity. You can turn even the worst negatives into something new and positive. If you can learn how to do that, then you don't give up. Then you can go on to the future.'

Jungk's view was that if people use the powers that are available to them, then the future, as a 'place to live in,' is far from being lost. He denied being an optimist, and claimed to be 'a pessimist who still believes that not everything has to be bad...' He felt that the important thing was to create contexts for social innovations; places where people can take ideas. 'From these seedbeds emerge the projects, the real practical changes that over time move our civilisation from its present self-destructive course.'

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