

## Isrun Engelhardt (1941-2022). In Memoriam

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It was around 2009 when I met Isrun. I was researching about Ernst Schäfer's times in Venezuela, when I was suggested to contact her. Isrun (Fig. 1) was a worldwide recognized Tibetan historian, who had thoroughly researched the 1938-1939 Schäfer-Tibet expedition probing that contrary to myth and misinterpretations, it was truly a scientific endeavor, "in intention and execution" (Anonymous 2022). I discussed with her all the informa-

tion I had already gathered from my investigation sources and she, without hesitation, shared articles and information she had obtained on the bright and complex explorer and naturalist.

Isrun Engelhardt (née Schwartz) was born in September 30, 1941, in the occupied German village of Arnsdorf (now Milków, Poland). The family had moved there hoping to be safe from the war. This was partially fulfilled un-



**Figure 1.** Isrun (on the right) arguing a point with Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi at the 2017 conference on Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) in Pistoia, Italy. Photo: John Bray.

til the area ended up controlled by the Russians at the end of WWII. By 1953, the family was able to move to Icking, near Munich, after Isrun's father was offered a position at the Institute of Contemporary History. Isrun would spend the rest of her life in Icking. She would marry Hans Dietrich Engelhardt, who became Professor of Sociology and Social Work at the Munich University of Applied Sciences. By 1974, she obtained a doctoral degree from the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, after her research on the politics of Byzantine Christian missionaries during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century (Anonymous 2022, Horleman & Bray 2022).

After graduation she would work as careers advisor for high school and university students, but once her son Emmanuel was born, in 1979, she would join the staff of a children's library. Later, she will seek training as a Professional Librarian.

Isrun and her husband, enthusiastic mountaineers, went on a trekking trip to Nepal in 1973. Impressed with the friendliness and religious devotion of their porters "hired from a Tibetan refugee camp near Pokhara", they decided to visit other regions bordering Tibet and influenced by Tibetan Buddhism (Anonymous 2022). These trips and

encounters led her to study Tibetan at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-University in Bonn. She also decided to resume her academic endeavors and started several research projects (Anonymous 2022, Horlemann & Bray 2022). She then carried out her research based at the Institute for Central Asian Studies at the University of Bonn, focusing on Tibetan-European encounters and relations. Her research has been widely recognized by the scientific community for its insightfulness and quality (Blondeau *et al.* 2008).

She received a research grant from the Gerda Henkel Foundation to investigate all things related to the 1938-1939 German Expedition led by the zoologist, ornithologist, ethnologist, and naturalist Ernst Schäfer (1910-1992) (Fig. 2). She was able to study numerous primary sources including his diary, recordings of his interrogations, files from the Ahnenerbe, Tibetan and British documents, confidential reports and official letters (Engelhard 2003). A very interesting and brilliant scientist, Schäfer and his third expedition to Tibet, would be unfortunately caught between politics and science. The expedition "was not sponsored by the SS or the Ahnenerbe," but entirely funded by Schäfer, his family, and his friends and colleagues



**Figure 2.** Members of the Schäfer-Tibet Expedition 1938-1939 in Gayokang, Sikkim, sitting with the minister of Tharing (left). Ernst Schäfer, mammalogist and ornithologist (left, besides the minister), Bruno Beger, anthropologist (center, back), Ernst Krause, photographer, entomologist (center, front), Kaiser Bahadur Thapa, interpreter (standing behind Beger), Karl Wienert, geophysicist (second from right), Edmund Geer, logistics and transport manager (right). Photo: Ernst Schäfer/Bundesharchiv.

(including scientists from USA and England) [only the last leg from Calcutta to Germany was done in Heinrich Himmler's (1900-1945) plane] (Engelhardt 2003, González 2010, 2011). Himmler and the Ahnenerbe provided only political support (Engelhardt 2003, 2004). Isrun would prove that Schäfer's intentions with his multidisciplinary approach to the expedition was to create "a complete biological record of Tibet", interrelating "natural sciences with aspects of the humanities" (Engelhardt 2004). Schäfer's intentions were entirely scientific and not political, esoteric, or occult, as frequently stated by misinformed authors (Rogers 2000, Engelhardt 2003, 2004, González 2010). Not only that but as the assigned director of the Center for Asian Research and Expeditions, Schäfer would praise, respect, and unconditionally help academics (even if they dissented the regime), as well as religious prisoners assigned to his research facilities (Heinrich 2007, Zettler de Vareschi 2011).

Isrun would be frequently asked to talk on issues surrounding Schäfer and his 1938-1939 Tibet expedition. By 2012, Elmar Buchner and colleagues published an article speculating that they "discovered an ancient Buddhist statue of extraterrestrial origin... taken by [the Schäfer expedition] in [the] 1930s" (Buchner *et al.* 2012). Isrun convincingly separating fact from fiction, argued that such figure was not brought by Schäfer and his team, but it was designed and made for the Russian painter, writer, archaeologist, theosophist, and eccentric philosopher, Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (or Roerich) (1874-1947) (Bayer 2012, Engelhardt 2017, Holerman & Bray 2022).

Besides her research on Schäfer's expedition, she was also engaged in studying the history of the *Tibet Mirror (Melong)*, a monthly newspaper, and his publisher, Gegen Dorje Tharchin (1890-1976), a prominent Tibetan public figure and political activist, who advocated for the modernization of Tibet and its independence from the Chinese communist regime of Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976).

She kept contact with friends, acquaintances and researchers, always encouraging and supportive. She left us on March 2, 2022.

She will be sorely missed but remembered for her well researched and highly insightful academic work, as well as her warmth, generosity and integrity.

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