

Freudenthal *cursief*

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In memoriam Hans Freudenthal

At a time, when endeavours were undertaken to reshape the field of mathematics education, Hans Freudenthal gave an example of how rich its scope could be viewed and of how passionately it could be pursued. He incorporated this scope and passion in himself, in a so to speak natural way, due to his vigorous curiosity and his human commitment, due to an abundant 19th century – style – ‘Bildung’, an outstanding competence in a scientific discipline outside education, and the experience of lifelong sophisticated observation.

This equipment, and his wit, made him a caustic critic of many researchers who in the sixties, seventies and eighties indulged in sublime formalized theories or self-sufficient empiricism. Those criticized preferred not to take Hans Freudenthal for serious, and he himself made it easy for them to do so, for he was never anxious about an academic wrapping of what he had to say. When in the seventies everybody strove for the acknowledgment of mathematics education as a scientific discipline, Hans Freudenthal told his ‘Tales of a Grandfather’.

This was a message for those who had ears to listen. It has often been reported on great persons that, notwithstanding the importance of their work, they in persona conveyed even better what they had to teach. This is also true for Hans Freudenthal. Most privileged were those who worked in IOWO under his guidance and later on carried forth the OW&OC-work under his attentive observation.

My own acquaintance with Hans Freudenthal in a way resulted from the recognition of common aversions: At an early point of my work, my studies had led me to

sharp criticism of both traditional routine and reform mainstreams in school mathematics, and I loved his sarcastic attacks in his publications, at conferences and meetings. I met Hans Freudenthal periodically at such occasions, and over the years the acquaintance grew to a sort of shy familiarity. My little son helped much to make it more direct: When, after the CIEAEM-conference at Leiden 1985, we took Hans Freudenthal back to Utrecht in our car, Moritz, aged five, and sad of never having known his grandfathers, asked him, whether he couldn’t be his vice-grandfather. Hans Freudenthal accepted, and he never forgot it. When he saw Moritz, and later when they exchanged letters, he so seriously shared views and observations with the child, I always was bewildered by the intensity of this communication. And in the very last period of his life, it was the easy going machinery of a text-system that freed Hans Freudenthal to witty, private causerie, abundant with anecdotes. Unfortunately there was so few time left to exploit the new tool – as he always appreciated strong tools. In his last letter, looking forward to his visit to Lückenwalde and Berlin, he wrote on the ninth of October:

’... bei allen sich kreuzenden Briefen habe ich versäumt, mich für die Geburtstagwünsche zu bedanken. Die grösste Freude hat mir Moritz’ Kunst gemacht. Ich zeige sie überall herum, so stolz bin ich auf diesen Enkel. Ich hoffe ihn bald wieder zu sehen – et puis nous parlerons français, n’est-ce pas, Maurice?
Alles Gute,

Hans Freudenthal.’

That children loose their grandfather, tells us of an ever renewing cycle. There are losses however, which cannot be replaced. The change they imply inevitably is a change to the worse.