

The Jewish philosopher who loved Nazi mentor

Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger

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Why did Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher who wrote passionately about acting ethically, even against tyrants, allow herself to be dominated for 50 years by philosopher Martin Heidegger, her former teacher and lover, who became a Nazi?

The question continues to perplex readers familiar with the well-documented lives of these remarkable 20th-century figures.

It's one that Elzbieta Ettinger, a humanities professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, tries to answer in this slim, unsatisfying account of two tangled lives.

Ettinger cautions us not to judge Arendt's "by today's standards," but to see her submission to Heidegger as a reflection of the old German teacher-pupil relationship, that of master to apprentice.

But even in 1924, at the University of Marburg, would it have been appropriate for a 34-year-old married professor with two children to initiate an affair with his 18-year-old student?

Would anyone have condoned Heidegger encouraging Arendt the next year to complete her

studies elsewhere, afraid the affair might threaten his career?

When Arendt agreed to leave because she loved him and didn't want to make things "more difficult," the pattern was set — Heidegger's peace of mind was all that mattered.

The work of great men is often separated in the public's mind from their private peccadilloes. Picasso, for instance, was viciously cruel to the women he painted and loved. But he was an artist and his women mostly models.

Heidegger, one of the founders of existentialism, is widely regarded as a giant in modern philosophy. In his major work, *Being And Time* (1927), he argued that humans had to confront "nothingness" without giving in to despair and to act honestly, with "authenticity."

In May, 1933, Heidegger joined the National Socialists and continued his membership until the party dissolved. As rector of Freiburg University, he signed the circular barring Jewish professors and students.

How could Arendt — a Jew, though an assimilated one — ever forgive him?

Arendt was not the only Jew who figured prominently in Heidegger's life: Edmund Husserl was his mentor, to whom he dedicated *Being And Time*; yet four years later Heidegger ended Husserl's teaching career.

In 1946, Arendt argued that Heidegger should have resigned



HANNAH ARENDT IN 1933: Why did she permit Martin Heidegger, who barred Jews from his university during Nazi era, to dominate her for 50 years?

rather than expel Jews like Husserl from academe. Yet, in 1952, she wrote that allegations of anti-Semitism against Heidegger were "based on rumors."

It was in Husserl's house in 1920 that Heidegger met Karl Jaspers, a respected philosopher, ardent democrat and existential theorist. Because he had a Jewish wife, Jaspers also was banned from teaching in Germany. He fled to Switzerland

and never saw Heidegger again.

But Arendt did, in 1950. She wrote to her husband, Heinrich Bluecher, about what happened when Jaspers told her to stop seeing Heidegger: "I became furious and told him that I will not accept any ultimatums."

Arendt managed to keep up relations with both men until death, but neither she nor Jaspers spoke publicly against Heidegger.

As Ettinger points out, "Although his two best friends ... were seriously involved in questions of ethics and morality, their theories failed them when it came to Martin Heidegger."

Heidegger never apologized for his Nazi beliefs; nor did he condemn Nazi atrocities. To regain his teaching position after the war, he brazenly cast himself as a victim, saying he was "an apolitical, harmless scholar ... who became the subject of persecution" first by the Nazis, then by the allies.

Only in private did Arendt acknowledge that Heidegger "lies notoriously, always and everywhere, and whenever he can." Ettinger doesn't speculate on what this might mean to followers of Heidegger who, unlike Arendt, weren't blinded by love.

Arendt and Bluecher, a former Communist, had moved to the United States in 1941. Ten years later, she published the celebrated *The Origins Of Totalitarianism*, a book she knew Heidegger would hate. It documented her belief that Nazism and communism (which he loathed) were both rooted in anti-Semitism and imperialism.

It made her famous, which Heidegger also hated. Yet until her death in 1970, she acted as his devoted, unpaid agent in the U.S., bolstering his reputation as well as his ego.

She even came to terms with Heidegger's wife, Elfride, an

early and devout Nazi. "Heidegger," writes Ettinger, "at least on the surface, wanted his wife and his former mistress to become close friends, but it seems that in reality he rather enjoyed being the object of both women's attentions. In any case, Arendt never ceased to believe that she was the woman in Heidegger's life."

This is the most compelling explanation Ettinger offers for an impossible friendship — Arendt's desire to retain her position, however subservient, in the life of a famous man who had loomed so large in her formative years.

But it's hard to assess the true nature of their relationship because Ettinger was not allowed to quote freely from their letters and because she does not examine their philosophical writings.

Are we to assume that, although they were both experts on thinking and acting, they felt no personal connection between the two activities?

Most of the material in *Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger* has been published before and the insights Ettinger provides are rarely illuminating. Perhaps only a novelist willing to re-imagine the facts, or a philosopher with Arendt's talent, could make sense of the story.

In the 1980s, Toronto writer Geraldine Sherman produced an Ideas series for CBC-Radio on Hannah Arendt.