

Esquisse

by Françoise Ulam



Stan was larger than life; his person defies description. Not any one, I think (myself included, of course), ever viewed the whole of him. I hope that from this special issue a composite picture will emerge. All I am able to contribute, at this time, is the following quick thumbnail sketch. (I think that trait is genetic, for it exists in varying degrees among members of his family I have known.)

He was a loner, a maverick, a very complicated man, a Pole, and, above all, a study in contrasts and contradictions, which often aroused mixed and conflicting emotions in people. He moved only to the beat of his own drum and never kow-towed to anyone or stooped to promote himself. Given to bragging in jest about inconsequential prowesses, he was singularly modest about his scientific accomplishments. "Posterity will decide!" was his way of putting it to me.

He electrified the air around all who came in touch with him, for his wit, cul-

ture, and erudition were dazzling. It was a sport for him to beat people at their own game. With a humanist he would display his classical education and “one-up” him with Latin and Greek. With historians he loved to debate obscure points of their specialties. And when he met a chemist, he would expound on his own views of chemistry—a subject he himself admitted he knew very little about.

Characteristically, he measured himself against the great of the past and not against his contemporaries, from whom he had a sort of Olympian detachment. But it’s lonely up there, so to test his own thoughts and opinions he constantly craved company, though often he felt excruciatingly bored. “People never tell me anything interesting,” he would complain.

He lived mainly in the confines of his mind, in a world of abstract cogitations. This made him shun most other forms of activity except chess and tennis, which he enjoyed. Outside science what attracted him the most were history, the classics, antiquity, the Renaissance.

Another characteristic of his was an absolute self-confidence and unflinching optimism. This served him in good stead in the dark moments of his life, for it enabled him to block them off.

But he paid a price. This urbane, gentle man who always appeared smiling, affable, and at ease suffered from what he called a “nervous stomach.” When alone he tended to dwell on such discomforts, except at the moment of death, which by contrast he took with extraordinary detachment. I believe that in a way he sensed it coming, though at the time, neither he nor I fully gauged the gravity of his final malaise.

We lived in New Mexico the better part of our lives, and from the first he loved its vistas and the quality of its air. Despite a deep-seated longing for his old world, Stan thrived in this country, and he loved its openness, dynamism, and scientific audacity.

In his youth he had the reputation of a Don Juan and remained very attractive to women, whose attentions he enjoyed. “Women seem to like me. I wonder why?” he would ask. As for me, over the years I became a partner on whom he leaned increasingly for most practical matters, his “Home Secretary,” in the British sense of the term, and managed most of his time and his affairs, which left him free to indulge his mind.

A more extraordinary person I have never known. I came alive when we first met at Harvard in 1939 and consider myself most fortunate to have basked in his aura, at the frontiers of twentieth-century science, for nearly half a century. ■

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