The Personality of Waldemar Gurian

by Hannah Arendt

He was a man of many friends and a friend to all of them, men and women, priests and laymen, people in many countries and from practically all walks of life. Friendship was what made him at home in this world and he felt at home wherever his friends were, regardless of country, language or social background. Knowing how sick he was, he made his last trip to Europe because, as he said, "I want to say farewell to my friends before I die." He did the same when he came back and stayed a few days in New York, did it consciously and almost systematically, without a trace of fear or self-pity or sentimentality. He who throughout his life had never been able to express personal feeling without the greatest embarrassment could do this in a kind of impersonal manner, without feeling, and therefore without causing, embarrassment. Death must have been very familiar to him.

He was an extraordinary and extraordinarily strange man. The temptation is great to illustrate this judgment by insisting on his enormous intellectual capacities, and to explain the strange feeling one always had that he came from nowhere by reciting the few data we have of his early life. Yet, all such attempts would fall hopelessly short of the man. Not his mind, but his person was extraordinary, and his early history would not sound strange if he had not treated it with the same reticent indifference he showed toward all personal facts and circumstances of his private and professional life, as though these like all mere facts could only be boring.

Not that he ever tried to hide anything. He always answered readily enough all direct questions put to him. He came from a Jewish family in St. Petersburg (the name Gurian is the russification of the more commonly known Lurie) and since he was born at the beginning of the century in Tsarist Russia, the birthplace itself indicates that he came from an assimilated and well-to-do family, because only such Jews—usually merchants and physicians—were permitted to settle outside the pale in one of the great
cities. He must have been about 9 years old when, a few years before the outbreak of the first world war, his mother took him and his sister to Germany and into the Catholic Church. I do not think that, when I first met him in Germany in the early thirties, I was aware of either the Russian background or the Jewish origin. He was already well-known as a German Catholic publicist and writer, a pupil of Max Scheler, the philosopher and of Carl Schmitt, the famous professor of constitutional and international law who later became a Nazi.

One cannot say that the events of 1933 changed him in the sense that they threw him back to his origins. The point is not that he was made conscious of his Jewish extraction, but that he now thought it necessary to talk about it publicly because it was no longer a fact of personal life; it had become a political issue and it was a matter of course for him to solidarize himself with those who were persecuted. He kept this solidarity and a constant interest in the Jewish fate up until the first post-war years; an outstanding brief account of the history of German anti-semitism, published in Essays on Antisemitism, New York, 1946, is witness to this preoccupation and at the same time to the extraordinary facility with which he could become an “expert” in any matter which aroused his interest. Yet, when the years of persecution were over and anti-semitism ceased to be a central political issue, his interest faded. The same is not true for the Russian background, which has played an altogether different and predominant role all his life. Not only did he look vaguely “Russian” (whatever that may be), but he never lost the language of his early childhood although the complete and radical change in his surroundings made him spend his whole adult life in a German-speaking milieu. So strong was the hold of everything Russian on his taste, his imagination and mentality that he spoke English and French with a marked Russian, not German accent, although I am told that he spoke Russian fluently but not like someone whose mother tongue it is. No poetry and literature—perhaps with the exception of Rilke in his later years—could equal his love of and familiarity with Russian writers. (In the small but significant Russian section of his library there was still a battered copy of War and Peace in a children’s edition, illustrated in the manner of the beginning of the century, with loose pages to which he returned throughout his
life.) And in the company of Russians he sometimes seemed more at ease than in other milieus, as if he belonged and was at home. His vast intellectual and political interests seemingly sent him into all directions. Actually they were centered around Russia, her intellectual and political history, her impact on the Western world, her unusual spiritual heritage, her religious passions as they are expressed first in the strange sectarianism of her people and later in her great literature. He became an outstanding expert in Bolshevism because nothing attracted him more and concerned him more deeply than the Russian spirit in all its ramifications.

I do not know whether the threefold break which occurred in his early life, the break-up of the family, the break from homeland and mother tongue, and the complete change of social milieu which conversion to the Catholic faith implied (for religious conflicts he was not only too young, he probably had hardly any religious education prior to his conversion) caused any deep wounds in his personality, and I am certain they are hopelessly inadequate to explain its strangeness. But I think that from the few things I have mentioned it should be apparent that if such wounds existed, he had healed them through faithfulness, simply by his being loyal to the essentials of his early memories. At any event, faithfulness to his friends, to everybody he had ever known, to everything he had ever liked, became so much the dominant note on which his life was tuned that one is tempted to say that the crime most alien to him was the crime of oblivion, perhaps one of the cardinal crimes in human relationships. His memory had a haunting and haunted quality, as though it had never been permitted to let go of anything or anybody. It was much more than the capacity needed for scholarship and erudition, where it became one of his chief instruments for objective achievement. His erudition, on the contrary, was only another form of his enormous capacity for loyalty. This loyalty made him follow the writings of every author who ever had aroused his interest and given him some satisfaction, even though he might never have met him, just as it compelled him to give his help unconditionally not only to friends when they were in need, but to their children after their death, even though he had never seen or wished to see them. As he grew older, it was only natural that the number of dead friends should increase; and although I never saw him violently stricken with grief, I was
aware of the almost calculated carefulness with which he mentioned their names as though he were afraid that through some fault of his they would slip away altogether from the company of the living.

All this was real and noticeable enough when one came to know him, but it gives no notion of the extraordinary strangeness of the huge man with the even larger head, the broad cheeks and slightly turned-up nose, the only humorous trait in his face, for his eyes were rather somber despite their clearness and the smile which suddenly could melt away the flesh of cheeks and chin was too much the smile of a boy who is surprised by delight as to contain humor, perhaps one of the most adult qualities. Yet, that he was a strange man, everyone must have noticed immediately, even those who knew him only in later years when strangeness and shyness—not timidity and never, to be sure, any sense of inferiority, but a movement of both soul and body of shying-away from everybody—had already given way, yielded, as it were, to the burdens of official position and public recognition. What surprised as strange at first glance was, I think, the fact that he was a complete stranger in the world of things, which we use and handle constantly, among which we move without noticing them, so that we are hardly aware that all life in each of its movements is implanted in, surrounded, guided and conditioned by non-moving, non-living things. If we stop to think of it, we may become aware of a discrepancy between living animate bodies and unmoving things, a discrepancy which is constantly bridged through using, handling, dominating the world of inanimate matter. But here this discrepancy had widened into something like an open conflict between the humanity of man and the re-ity of things and his awkwardness had such a touching, convincing human quality because it showed all things up as mere matter, as objects in the most literal sense of the word, namely as objectionable and objecting to man. It was as though a battle was constantly going on between this man whose very humanity would not allow for the existence of things, who refused to recognize in himself their potential fabricator and habitual ruler, and the objects themselves, a battle in which curiously and actually inexplicably, he never won a victory or was crushed by defeat. The things used to survive rather better than one dared to expect; and he never got caught to the point of plain
catastrophe. And this conflict, strange and moving in itself, became all the more typical since his huge body was like the first, the quasi-primordial "thing" in which the res-quality of the world had first been incarnated.

We moderns, to whom the homo faber quality has become so dominant in our understanding of man and men, are easily tempted to misunderstand awkwardness and shyness as semi-psychopathological phenomena, especially if they cannot be traced to feelings of inferiority which we assume to be "normal." Yet, pre-modern times must have known certain combinations which strike us as strange to belong to a perhaps not common, but still well-known type. The many serious and humourous mediaeval tales about very fat men, and the fact that gluttony had to be counted among the cardinal sins (which we find a little hard to understand) bear witness to this. For the obvious alternative to making, using, handling and dominating things is the attempt even if always defeated, to devour them—and he was a perfect example of this quasi-mediaeval solution in the middle of the modern world. (Ches-tertton it seems was another one, and I suspect that much of his great insight into, not so much the philosophy, but the person, of St. Thomas sprang from the sheer sympathy of one very awkward and very fat man with another.) In this case too, it started, as it should if it was at all genuine, with eating and drinking for which, as long as he was in good health, he had an almost Gargantuan capacity and a kind of triumphant delight. However, his capacity for the food of the mind was even greater, and his curiosity, abetted by a memory of likewise Gargantuan dimensions, had the same devouring, insatiable quality. He was like a walking library of information and this had some intimate connection with the bulk of his body. The slowness and awkwardness of his bodily movements corresponded with a swiftness to absorb, digest, communicate and retain information—the like of which I have never seen in anybody else. His curiosity was like his appetite, not at all the sometimes rather lifeless curiosity of the scholar and expert, but concerned with nearly everything that mattered in the strictly human world, from politics through literature and philosophy to theology, and again down to the trifles of anecdote and the in-numerable newspapers he felt compelled to read every day. To devour and assimilate mentally everything related to human affairs
and, at the same time, to leave out with sublime indifference everything in the realm of the physical—whether natural sciences or the "knowledge" of how to drive a nail into the wall—this appeared to be his kind of revenge upon the common human fact that demands of a soul to live in a body and of a living body to move in an environment of "dead" things.

It is this attitude toward the world which made him so very human and sometimes so very vulnerable. If we say that somebody is human, we ordinarily think of some special kindness, or easy approachability or something of this sort. For the same reason I have mentioned, because we are so inclined to identify ourselves with what we make and do, we frequently forget that it remains the greatest prerogative of every single man to be essentially and forever more than anything he can produce or achieve, not only to remain, after each work and achievement, the not yet exhausted, sheer inexhaustible source of further achievements, but to be in his very essence beyond all of them, untouchable and unlimited by them. We know how people daily and gladly forfeit this prerogative and identify themselves wholly with what they do, proud of their intelligence or work or genius, and it is true that remarkable results can be the outcome of such identification. Yet, impressive as such results may be, this invariably loses the specifically human quality of greatness, of being greater than anything done. True greatness, even in works of art, where the struggle between the greatness of genius and the even greater greatness of man is most acute, appears only where we sense behind the tangible and comprehensible product a being that remains greater and more mysterious because the work itself points to a person behind it whose essence can be neither exhausted nor fully revealed by whatever he may have the power to do.

This specifically human quality of greatness, the very level, intensity, depth, passionateness of existence itself was known to him to an extraordinary degree. Because he had it himself as the most natural thing in the world, he was an expert at detecting it in others, and this quite regardless of any position or achievement. He never failed in this, and it remained his ultimate standard of judgment in whose favor he discarded not only the more superficial yardsticks of worldly success, but also the legitimate objective standards, which he knew, on the other hand, to perfection. To
say of a man that he had an unerring sense for quality and relevance sounds like nothing, like a complimentary conventional phrase. And yet, in the not frequent cases where men possessed it and chose not to exchange it for more easily recognizable and acceptable values, it infallibly has led them far—far beyond conventions and established standards of society—and carried them directly into the dangers of a life that is no longer protected by the walls of objects and objective evaluations. It means to be friends with people who at first, and even second, sight have nothing in common, to discover constantly persons whom only bad luck or some queer trick of talent has prevented from coming fully into their own, it means to discard systematically, though not necessarily consciously, all, even the most respectable standards of respectability. It leads invariably into a kind of life that will offend many, be vulnerable to many objections, open to frequent misunderstandings; there always will be conflicts with those in power, and this without willed intention from the offender and without any ill will from the offended, but simply because power must be exerted in accordance with objective standards.

What used to save him from getting into trouble was not only, and perhaps not even primarily, his enormous intellectual capacity and the eminence of his achievements. It was even more that curiously boyish, at times slightly mischievous innocence which was so unexpected in this complicated and difficult person and which shone in convincing purity whenever his smile lit up an otherwise rather melancholy facial landscape. What finally convinced even those he had antagonized by some flare of temper was that he never meant any real harm. To him, provocation, being provoked no less than provoking, was essentially a means to bring out into the open the real and relevant conflicts we are so careful to stifle in polite society, to cover up with meaningless civilities, with that sham-considerateness we call “not hurting anybody’s feelings.” He was delighted when he could break down these barriers of so-called civilized society, because he saw in them barriers between human souls. At the source of this delight were innocence and courage, innocence all the more captivating as it occurred in a man who was so extremely well versed in the ways of the world, and who therefore needed all the courage he could muster to keep his original innocence alive and intact. He was a very courageous man.
Courage was viewed by the ancients as the political virtue *par excellence*. Courage, understood in the fullest sense of its many meanings, probably drove him into politics, which may appear bewildering in a man whose original passion was doubtless for ideas and whose deepest concern was clearly the conflicts of the human heart. To him, politics was a battlefield not of bodies, but of souls and ideas, the only realm where ideas could take form and shape until they would fight each other, and in this fight emerge as the true reality of the human condition and the innermost rulers of the human heart. In this sense, politics was to him a kind of realization of philosophy, or to put it more correctly the realm where the mere flesh of material conditions for men's living-together is consumed by the passion of ideas. His political sense therefore became essentially a sense for the dramatic in history, in politics, in all contacts between man and man, soul and soul, idea and idea. And just as in his scholarly work he searched out the high-spots of drama where all coverings are burnt away and ideas and men clash in a kind of immaterial nakedness (i.e. under conditions of absence of those material circumstances without which we commonly can no more bear the light of the spirit than we can bear the light of the sun in a cloudless sky), so he sometimes appeared in his intercourse with friends to be almost possessed by an urge to search out the potentialities for drama, the opportunities for a big, blazing battle of ideas, for one gigantic fight of souls in which everything would come to light.

He did not do this often. What kept him from it was never lack of courage, of which he had rather too much than too little, but a highly developed sense of considerateness which was much more than politeness, and which combined itself with the early shyness which he never lost altogether. What he dreaded most was embarrassment, a situation in which he would embarrass somebody or be embarrassed by others. The embarrassing situation, whose whole depth was explored probably only by Dostoievski, is in a sense the reverse side of that blazing triumphant battle of souls and ideas in which the human spirit can sometimes free itself of all conditions and conditionings. Whereas in the battle of ideas, in the nakedness of confrontation, men soar freely above their conditions and protections in an ecstasy of sovereignty, not defending but confirming with absolutely no defenses *who* they are, the
embarrassing situation exposes them and points to them at a moment when they are least ready to show themselves, when things and circumstances have unexpectedly conspired to deprive the soul of its natural defenses. The trouble is that the embarrassing situation drags into the limelight the same defenseless self which man can bear to show freely only in the supreme effort of courage. Embarrassment played a great role in his life (he was not only afraid of it, but also attracted by it), because it repeats on the level of human relations, the one level he always and in all respects was ready to recognize, the alienation of man from the world of things. Just as things were to him dead objects, hostile to men's living existence to the point of making him their helpless victim, so in the embarrassing situation men are victims of circumstance. This in itself is humiliating, so that it scarcely matters whether what is dragged into the light is something shameful or honorable. It was the greatness of Dostoevski's genius to sum up in a single situation these different aspects of embarrassment: When the prince in the famous party-scene in the Idiot breaks the precious vase, he is exposed in his clumsiness, his inability to fit into the world of man-made things; at the same time this exposure shows most conclusively his "goodness," that he is "too good" for this world. The humiliation lies in the fact that he is exposed as somebody who is good, and cannot help being good, just as he cannot help being clumsy.

Humiliation is the extreme of embarrassment. Combined in him, closely connected in fact with his impulse of defiance against conventions and powers-that-be was a veritable passion for the dispossessed, the disinherited and downtrodden, those whom life or men had treated badly, who had been dealt with unjustly. He who ordinarily would feel himself attracted only where he saw intelligence and spiritual creativity, forgot in such cases all his other standards; even his great fear of boredom would not prevent his going out of his way to meet such people. He always became their friend, following the later events in their lives with an intensity which was as removed from curiosity as it was from sheer compassion. It was not so much the people, it was the story that fascinated him, the drama itself, as though he said breathlessly to himself over and over again—such is life, such is life. He had a deep and genuine respect for those whom life had singled out to
write its story and he never showed any pity as though he would not have dared to pity them. The only thing he did (apart from helping, of course, wherever he could) was to bring them purposely into the society, into contact with his other friends in order to undo, as far as it was in his power, the humiliation which society invariably adds to the injury of misfortune. The dramatic reality of life and world as he saw it could never be complete, could not even begin to unfold itself outside the company of the dispossessed and disinherited.

This insight into the true quality of humiliation and this passion for the downtrodden are so well known to us through the great Russian writers that we can hardly fail to notice how “Russian” he was in his being a Christian. Yet, in him this Russian feeling for what the essence of human life is was intimately blended with his altogether Western sense of reality. And it was precisely in this sense that he was a Christian and a Catholic. His uncompromising realism, which formed perhaps the outstanding trait of his contributions to history and political science, was to him the natural result of Christian teachings and Catholic training. (He had a deep contempt for all sorts of perfectionists and never tired of denouncing their lack of courage to face reality). He knew very well what he owed to them for having been able to remain what he was, a stranger in the world, never quite at home in it, and at the same time a realist. It would have been easy for him to conform, for he knew the world very well; it would have been easier for him, a greater temptation in all probability to escape into some utopianism. His whole spiritual existence was built on the decision never to conform and never to escape, which is only another way of saying that it was built on courage.

He remained a stranger and whenever he came it was as though he arrived from nowhere. But when he died, his friends mourned him as though a member of the family had gone and left them behind. He had achieved what we all must: he had established his home in this world and he had made himself at home on the earth through friendship.