Appendix

Remembering Max Perutz, Scientist and Humanitarian

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In 1993 Max Perutz, along with two other Nobel Laureates, François Jacob and Torsten Wiesel and, a judge on the Netherlands Council of State, Pieter van Dijk, became founding members of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies. Their vision was to raise the consciousness of national academies around the world about the need to defend fellow scientists and scholars who become victims of severe repression simply for exercising their rights, rights that are promulgated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their goal was to persuade and equip these academies, through the Network, to advocate for their unjustly imprisoned professional colleagues around the world.

Max was a world-renowned scientist who, in 1962, along with John C. Kendrew, won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry “for their studies of the structures of globular proteins.” In addition to a brilliant mind and creative spirit, Max had a passionate and compassionate soul that compelled him to promote and protect human rights. He studied hemoglobin with patience, stubborn persistence, and determination for more than 25 years before discovering its structure; he applied these same qualities in his pursuit of justice for other less fortunate scientists. In his essay titled “By What Rights Do We Invoke Human Rights?” (2002) Max wrote: “I plead for human rights because many innocent men and women owe them their freedom and because they have had, and are having, a strong civilizing influence. They are something to strive for to make a better world” (p. 272).
Max embraced life with joy and humor, but he also cared deeply about alleviating human suffering. He was outraged by injustice and appalled by brutality. Pulling no punches, he fought the good fight with energy and fervor to the very end of his life. His death, on February 6, 2002, at the age of 88, came at a time when the Network’s founders and early supporters had succeeded in attracting dozens of national academies to their cause and motivating their interventions, an accomplishment of which he was proud and happy. According to Georgina Ferry in *Max Perutz and the Secret of Life* (2007), he had written to his son Robin about the Network and said: “the people who run this committee are idealists with a thoroughly practical bent and a shrewd understanding of human nature. It is a pleasure to work with them” (p. 281).

Copies of letters and appeals that Max wrote are in the Network’s files—all meticulously written in his own hand. He wrote to imprisoned colleagues and their families, encouraging them to stay strong. He wrote to heads of state and government ministers, requesting their humanitarian interventions for prisoners of conscience. And he wrote to the Network’s secretariat to raise human rights issues, to comment on the direction of its work, and to share his worries about the many and often heart-wrenching human rights abuses that it confronted. He even wrote to point out a grammatical error or improper punctuation in a Network publication.

But then there came a day, on December 23, 2001, when he wrote the following:

My good news is that I’ve solved a critically important structure, the structure of the protein fibers that make up the plaques in the brain of Alzheimer’s patients. That same structure is found in many other fibers that lead to neurodegenerative diseases, including Huntington’s disease. I’ve done nothing else for the last three months, left all letters unanswered and failed to respond to any of your appeals [from the Network’s secretariat], because thinking of nothing else was the only way of getting the work finished, so that I was able to send my manuscript off to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences last Monday, enormously pleased to have done this.

But then he continued: “The bad news is that I have a rare cancer, and all attempts to contain it have
failed.” During a last visit paid to Max at his home in Cambridge, England, although he was in pain, he had retained his sense of humor. He recounted that during his life he had had occasion to meet the Queen of England, so he had recently written her to say how honored he felt to have met her and to say goodbye. Then, with a sparkle in his eyes and his usual mischievous chuckle, he said: “I signed the letter ‘Your Humble Servant, but not for much longer.’”

Max died two weeks later. In his last letter to us he wrote:

I’m lucky to have had a fantastically long life and that I can end it with another discovery. There has been a succession of them since 1950. Also that my life has brought me friendships with so many outstanding, bright, lively, dedicated, and decent, heartwarming people, whom it has been a joy to know.

The Network now includes 75 national academies and scholarly societies. It hosts a Max Perutz Memorial Lecture at a different national academy every two years, when it meets to review its work and plan its future course. In May 2009, Dr. Felton Earls gave the Perutz Lecture, titled “Darwin and Lincoln: Their Legacy of Human Dignity,” at the Academy of the Kingdom of Morocco. Max’s daughter Vivien, after reading the lecture, said: “My father would certainly have been very pleased with the lecture. Darwin was a man whom he admired enormously and not just for his science.” Perutz’s lifetime of scientific achievements brought him great admiration, as did his dedication to the struggle for justice, equality, and human rights. His admirers could perhaps best honor his memory by carrying on his struggle.

Readers can learn more about the Network by visiting our Web site (http://www.nas.edu/hrnetwork).

References
