

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE A. ROEPER

George Roeper was a remarkable man: courageous, thoughtful, resourceful and deeply ethical. Despite having witnessed one of the world's greatest inhumanities — the Nazi regime — George still believed in the goodness inherent in human nature. His experience in Germany only gave greater impetus to his desire to give children the opportunity to achieve their highest potential by growing up in an environment in which they were respected, trusted and learned the critical values of tolerance, open-mindedness and a commitment to justice rather than power.



George was born in Hamburg on September 7, 1910, but spent the first seven years of his life in Japan where his father, also named George, was a steel broker for the Trans-Siberian Railway project. He had one sibling, an older brother named Hans. His father could be harsh, but his mother, Anna, was warm and loving.

When he was 13, George began attending Max and Gertrud Bondy's boarding school. Gertrud was a psychoanalyst and Max had been active in the German Youth Movement, which, like the 1960s American youth movement, advocated a free society. Together they had a vision of creating a kinder, more moral world by educating children to know themselves and to learn how to collaborate in open, supportive communities.

At the school George also met his life's partner in love and work — Max and Gertrud's oldest daughter, Annemarie. Although she was eight years younger than George, they had an immediate affinity that grew over the years into love until neither could imagine a life without the other.

In 1930, George graduated from Marienau and entered university to study economics, although he always assumed he and Annemarie would open a school of their own one day. Then in 1933 the Nazis ascended to power. The Bondys were Jewish by heritage, although they had been baptized as Lutherans in 1924. Max, a decorated German Army veteran, felt safe but George, who was not Jewish, recognized the danger. He obtained non-Jewish passports for the family and, with a great deal of effort, persuaded Max to get out while he still could. When Annemarie was studying medicine at the University of Vienna in 1938, George again read the political winds wisely and warned her to leave. Annemarie got on the last train to cross the Austrian frontier before the Germans invaded on March 12.

Later in 1938 an old Marienau friend slipped him the word that he was on a list of people to be summarily executed for his activities. He put on mountain-climbing clothes, wired a few blackened bars of gold under his car and drove to a small border crossing, where he persuaded the guard he was only off for a day of climbing. He sped through the crossing and joined the Bondys in Switzerland.

As the European situation deteriorated, the family decided to emigrate to the United States. Once again, George led the way, sailing to America in late 1938 to look for property where the family could establish a new school. Despite not being able to speak English, he succeeded in finding sites for a summer camp and a school by the time the Bondys arrived in April 1939. On April 20, George, 28, and Annemarie, 20, got married at City Hall in New York City.

In 1941, the young couple came to Detroit to direct a psychoanalytically based nursery school. Annemarie ran the nursery and George began teaching grade school children. They outgrew the first building, then a second. In 1946, only five years after arriving in Detroit, the couple had enough support to be able to move the school to a beautiful estate in Bloomfield Hills reminiscent of Marienau.

George was a tall man with a quiet authority who exuded calmness but was in constant action. The school only ran through sixth grade when they moved to Bloomfield Hills, but George pushed to double the number of classrooms and extend the number of grades. He always had plans underway for new construction, more staff and innovative programs, including his bold plan in 1956 when he turned the school into only the second elementary school in the country devoted exclusively to gifted children.

George made it a point to get to know every student, and taught an ethics class starting with the youngest grades. He travelled worldwide to study educational practices, and also spoke throughout the Metro area about civil rights and educational reform. For many of these years, he was also handling the school's finances — calculating budgets on the backs of envelopes and raising money.

All this was on top of a full personal life. He and Annemarie had three children: Tom was born in 1944, Peter in 1946, and Karen in 1949. They traveled back to Massachusetts every Christmas to celebrate with the Bondy family at Windsor Mountain School, and went to Europe many summers. For George and Annemarie, life was a seamless whole of school, community, family, travel, thinking and doing.

George retired in 1979 when he was 68 years old. By then, the school had grown to 507 students, all on one campus, and had graduated its first senior class in 1969. Annemarie ran the school for one year and retired in 1980. They moved to California in 1983 where they continued to be active in politics — particularly with Amnesty International and nuclear disarmament — as well as with gifted education.

In October 1991 a catastrophic wildfire burst into flame right behind their house in the Oakland Hills. George was having difficulty walking by then, but with only minutes to act Annemarie helped him to the car and they escaped. George died of pneumonia on August 24, 1992, at the age of 81. Almost 800 people attended a memorial service in September that was held at Roeper.

