

94 going on 61

Edward Bernays: A man of all ages

By DARRELL SIFFORD
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

There I was, in a very old house on a very old street in stately Cambridge, Mass., and this 94-year-old man and I were lunching on the chicken cacciatore that he had thawed and drinking half a gallon of rose wine that he poured as if there would be no tomorrow.

By the end of my four-hour interview with Edward L. Bernays, I wasn't certain that there would be a tomorrow for me — or that it much mattered.

When it was time for me to go, Bernays phoned the taxi company and asked simply, "When you send a cab to my house, how long will it take you to get my friend to the airport?" Apparently satisfied with the answer, he said, "Well, OK, where's the cab?"

In about two minutes a maroon-and-white taxi was parked quietly in the driveway beside the house, and I shook hands with Bernays, gave him a hug and wafted toward the taxi.

"How did you know where to come?" I asked the driver. "I heard him call, and he never identified himself or gave an address."

The driver, who spoke in a manner that suggested that he had done graduate work in English, smiled and told me, "Oh, yes, Mr. Bernays. The dispatchers all know his voice. Everybody knows Mr. Bernays."

Yes, indeed, Edward L. Bernays, the father of public relations, the author of enough books to fill a small library, the adviser to presidents from Coolidge to Eisenhower and also to Enrico Caruso, Samuel Goldwyn, Thomas Edison, Eleanor Roosevelt and Henry Ford.

I had gone to interview him to get his reflections on Sigmund Freud, who was Bernays' uncle and with whom Bernays had spent much time and exchanged much correspondence. But what he had to say about Freud — "Uncle Sigi" — was only a part of the interview. The man is absolutely fascinating, a storyteller without peer.

Here is a classic Bernays story, his response to my inevitable question about how he's able to remain so vital and active at his age:

"I was down in Florida to talk at a university, and one of the kids in



Sigmund Freud

the audience asked, 'What makes you so much younger than you are?' I said, 'DNA.' Later I talked to the professor who had invited me, and he said that 21 students had come in, separately, to see him because they wanted to know the name of that drug that had kept me so youthful." DNA, of course, is no drug, but the body's basic genetic material.

Bernays, who still consults with clients on public relations and travels the country to speak, was active a while back in the passage of a Massachusetts bill to outlaw mandatory retirement at 65. He said that people had five ages — chronological, physiological, mental, societal and emotional — and that to retire somebody solely on the basis of years lived amounted to "economic injustice."

I told him that I understood about chronological, physiological, mental and emotional age, but what on earth was societal age?

"It's how you adjust to others," he said. "You can be 65 and still be as nervous around people as you were at 6."

What are the ages that Bernays will acknowledge — besides his 94 years?

"My doctor examined me on my birthday and assessed my physiological age at around 61. But my mental, emotional and societal ages are none of anybody's business."

As he tells it, Bernays was a leader after Prohibition in getting beer out of taverns and into grocery stores. "The brewers wanted me to tell them how to get disconnected from the saloons . . . and the criminal environment that saloons represented to many people. I hired a home economist to research the attitudes of Revolutionary War heroes toward beer. She found, among

other things, that George Washington loved the chocolate beer cake that Martha made. We put out a beer-recipe book that helped reverse public attitudes about beer. We sent copies to members of state legislatures, and that's why in many states you now can buy beer in grocery stores."

What he did for beer, Bernays also did for men's wristwatches. He was retained by a manufacturer who was concerned about the low sale of wristwatches, which, said Bernays, tended to be viewed by many men as something worn only by those with paisley neckties and sweaty palms. Bernays recommended that the manufacturer give thousands of wristwatches to American soldiers and then, through advertising, invite men everywhere to "wear the watches that our soldiers wear." Almost overnight, he said, wristwatches became a symbol of American masculinity.

Bernays did promotional work for and helped manage an American tour by Enrico Caruso, the legendary Italian singer.

Here's a favorite story about Caruso: "We went into a department store in Cincinnati, and Caruso found a perfume that he really liked, and he said to the clerk: 'I'll take a pint. You do sell it by the pint, don't you?' He did things on a grand scale."

Another favorite: "Caruso never ate before a concert. He said that to sing, he needed the blood in his head, not in his stomach. One night after a concert we were eating dinner in this nice restaurant, and he and I were talking, and all of a sudden he disappeared under the table — this big, fat man. I said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'I felt a draft.' I found the head waiter and told him to get rid of the draft, which he did by closing a window. This was an ongoing fear that Caruso had — of catching cold in a draft."

By any yardstick, Bernays has done well in life, but he is not without some regret.

His revealing book, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays*, sold for \$12.95 when it was published in 1965. "It's out of print now and selling for \$50 a copy in second-hand bookstores. I only have two copies. I wish I'd bought more copies instead of investing in stocks and bonds."