Bernd Lambert was born in Frankfurt, Germany, and the story of his childhood perhaps explains much regarding his curiosity about the world, his kindness, and his meticulous professionalism. His father, Fritz ("Fred") Levy-Oswald, was born in Germany, served in the trenches in the German Army in World War I, and then worked as a banker until intervention by the Nazis forced him out, as a Jew; Josef Goebbels himself was said to have intervened personally at the Deutsche Bank. Fred Levy married Bernd's mother, Sabine (Kahn) Levy, in 1932 and the family moved between Berlin, Frankfurt, and Sofia, Bulgaria; they also had a daughter, Marion, in 1936. In 1937 the family relocated to Sofia, where they were able to stay until once again forced out by Nazi policy in March 1941.

Then ensued a wartime voyage through Odessa, Moscow, and Vladivostok, across the Soviet Union, and then by boat to Tsuruga, Japan, and then Yokohama. Bernd had completed two years at the American School in Sofia, which included a little English instruction, and along the course of that trip served as translator for the family at points, when a little English was the best linguistic match available (they also used German, Yiddish, and Bulgarian along the way, the latter close enough to Russian to get by). Most of their companions on that trip were fellow Jews fleeing the Nazis, from Poland and Bulgaria and elsewhere; at least one family "disappeared" en route, and Bernd's parents had to expend much of the money they had been able to gather for the trip as well as considerable skill at negotiating bureaucracies in order to keep the family moving, fed, and housed. At the end of April 1941 they embarked from Yokohama on a Japanese freight-transport ship for San Francisco. A fellow traveler on the way to San Francisco, concerned about using the recognizably Jewish Levy in front of "Aryan" Germans, suggested that they take on the name Lambert.

Arriving in San Francisco in May 1941, a family of four with almost no resources, with limited English language ability, they spent a week in a detention center for undesirable immigrants until funds from a small account the family had previously set up in New York were forwarded by a family friend there. After almost a year, and night-school classes, Bernd's father was able to get
a position as an accountant, and six years later his mother opened Sabina Lambert's Knitting Studio. In the late 1950s they received some restitution from the German government for their wartime losses.

As a child immigrant growing up in San Francisco Bernd found it difficult to make friends, but developed his senses and powers of observation in that culturally rich environment. In college at Berkeley he took a cultural anthropology course to fill the science requirement in what seemed an easy way, and was drawn to the field both by general curiosity about humans and by what he called "anthropotherapy": the idea of studying others in order to learn about oneself. Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie, anthropologists specializing in Native North America who had built the Berkeley department, had retired by the time Bernd was there, but the program still emphasized studies in Native North America; that grounding would prove useful to Bernd at Cornell. He completed his Bachelor's degree in 1954, and after two years of service in the U.S. Army stationed in Germany Bernd returned to continue in Berkeley's graduate program. Bernd later said that he found the discipline then "much more theoretical" compared to the "factual" anthropology that had constituted his undergraduate experience.

In many ways, Bernd’s anthropology spanned most of the history and currents in modern American anthropology. He remained ever-loyal to his original teachers: John Rowe, who was his first anthropology teacher, and convinced Bernd to study anthropology; David Schneider, who assured Bernd that the lack of course work in field methods at Berkeley wouldn’t be a problem for him in his research because he "was an intelligent man"; and, above all, Robert Murphy, who chaired Bernd’s doctoral committee and remained a lifelong friend and mentor.

In 1958 Bernd received funding through the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program (Yale, Hawaii, and the Bishop Museum in Hawaii) to do research in the Gilbert Islands (despite his training focused more on North America, and a personal interest in Africa), and in 1959 he left California for the field. He often talked in later years of how distant and isolated the Pacific islands were then, necessitating a long sea voyage to reach.

Despite the distance, Bernd returned to Kiribati (the current name of the former Gilbert Islands, adopted at independence in 1979) nine times over the next 50 plus years, most recently in 2012. He worked primarily on two of the more than 30 atolls which comprise the island nation, Makan and Butaritari. Much of his work was on kinship and adoption on these islands, a subject he learned about by being adopted into the fabric of Kiribati society. One of his fellow Micronesian anthropologists hailed him by saying "Kiribati was in him and he was in Kiribati."

In Kiribati, Bernd uncovered a system of ambilineal kinship relations which was in contrast to the unilineal systems of descent and inheritance in many other parts of the world. In an ambilineal or cognatic system, people honored relatives on both sides of their genealogy equally. Bernd was also sensitive to the ways that kinship was created through adoption and fosterage. He found that many children lived in households other than those of their birth parents. Some of these arrangements were similar to adoption in western societies where the care-giving adults became the parents of the children. Other arrangements were less permanent but arose from status differentials where higher status families sent their children to live with those of lower status for a period of time, thus bestowing status to those families.
After completing his Ph.D. at Berkeley in 1963, Bernd took up a post-doctoral position at the University of Pittsburgh for 1963-64 (where even the Pirates winning the World Series could not dislodge his never-waning devotion to the Giants). Bernd joined the Department of Anthropology at Cornell in 1964 and dedicated his entire career to students and colleagues with unfailing generosity until his death. His prolific reading, expansive scope of interests, and nearly encyclopedic memory made him an ever-engaging colleague and unique teacher. Interacting with students in and out of the classroom, Bernd was a fount of provocative ideas and inspiration for generations of Cornellians, and prodigious in his service to students. His courses -- notably "Myth, ritual and symbol" and "Kinship and social organization" -- were anchors of the Cornell Anthropology program and shaped the reputation and impact of Cornell’s distinctive vision of anthropology throughout the country.

With Bob Smith, Bernd started Cornell’s first regular course on North American Indians in 1972. He continued to teach that course for many years after, and was also an active -- but never controlling -- member of the American Indian Program after it was begun a few years later. As a teacher, Bernd was exceptional, not only for the breadth and clarity of his lectures, but especially for the kindness and charity with which he responded to student questions: his was a skill which defined the art, transforming even the most awkwardly conceived question into something that not only made the asker feel good, but became an opportunity for adding new knowledge to the exchange. Few will ever approach his ability to make even ambilineal descent groups in the Northern Gilbert Islands unabashedly riveting. Integral to Bernd’s presence in Anthropology was his willingness to continue to share his love of teaching and students beyond the classroom. His gurgling laughter -- almost a giggle -- was infectious, and he shared it and himself generously at colloquia and social gatherings.

Bernd was a socio-cultural anthropologist in the full sense of the term, a student of comparative social formations as they are grounded in extensive empirical field studies of one or more different societies. His work developed as the traditions of Europe and America, sociology and cultural anthropology merged in a more integrated approach to epistemology, linguistic and cultural forms. The bringing together of different theoretical traditions and ethnographic instances involved in creating the discipline of socio-cultural anthropology was a challenging project fraught with conflict between established authorities, national traditions and theoretical positions. Bernd stood out for the humor, humility, and understanding with which he was able to mediate the differences while keeping in sight the promise and potentiality of the field.

Bernd was a bibliophile and was always reading multiple books at one time. He annotated each book he bought with the date, place, and often occasion of its purchase. After retirement, he remained a regular participant in departmental events and continued to work with and advise students, particularly a few interested in Pacific Island languages. The passing of first Marcia and then Bob Ascher took Bernd to the synagogue for their services, and he recognized there traditions and philosophies not pursued, but deeply resonant. Before his untimely death Bernd had been working with his fieldnotes from Kiribati, on language and culture, with graduate student Kathryn Hudson and on his own; on gender relations and their expression in mythic stories (he gave a lecture in the Cornell Anthropology Department in October 2014 entitled
"Mothers and Sons: the Female Side of Kiritibati Cultural Heroes"); and on his family history. Some of these materials may be published posthumously.

Frederic Gleach, chair; Jane Fajans, Kathryn March