

Philip Weiss EULOGY

Philip Weiss left us a testament more powerful and enduring than any eulogy. In his 85th year, he published his book of reflections on the Holocaust. It contains the speeches and essays that Philip wrote over many decades. To read it is to hear Philip in his own voice. It enables us, and those who will follow us, to know not only his thoughts but his character.

The title of his book is Humanity in Doubt. It has several profound meanings. Philip meant us to ponder them.

Philip's will and endurance saw the book through to publication. He painstakingly attended to its form as well as to its content. The stark and riveting image on the cover is Philip's own creation. He was an award-winning designer and manufacturer of furniture. In everything he did, there was not only the craftsman's attention to detail, but the eye of an artist. His aesthetic sense complemented his character. His productions, both material and literary, were meticulous, clean and elegant. He would never embellish a surface to disguise an underlying structural weakness. The foundation had to be solid and true.

Philip believed that his mission as a survivor of the Holocaust was to bear witness. The truth must be told about the destruction. And more than that, about who and what was destroyed; about the lives and hopes that preceded the terror. He was haunted by the fear that the individual identity of many who perished would be forever lost to memory. He led the campaign to place a Holocaust memorial on the grounds of the Manitoba legislature. It commemorates the relatives of Manitoba families who were murdered in the Holocaust. For many who perished, it is the only memorial that bears their name.

Philip rose every time the Mourner's Kaddish was read in synagogue. On too many occasions, he stood in honour of a member of his own immediate family. On every occasion, he stood to honour the victims of the Holocaust who had no family left to mourn them.

Philip bore witness to much of what he had personally seen and experienced. He did so because he thought it was his painful duty. And for all of the horror that he described, there were even worse horrors of which even he could not speak. He kept those worst of all memories within him, close to his soul. Sometimes they forced themselves into his thoughts, but he never released them to the outside world.

His surname, Weiss, in many ways evokes his character. Weiss, the Yiddish word meaning white, the colour of an unyielding conscience. Wise, the English word that speaks of long experience and discernment. And Whys as the plural of the question why. That three letter word – which Philip tended to sound out in a long and rising legato - was to me the most characteristic of his expressions. He was always looking for an explanation. "Because I say so" impressed Philip not a bit, no matter how exalted your title or position. He was by nature a free-thinking intellectual as well as an artist.

So Philip approached the Holocaust not only as a memoirist, but as a scholar. He asked himself some of the most wrenching questions that anyone could raise. Why did the Jewish leaders of the time make the decisions they did when forced to make inhumanly painful choices? Why did the heavens remain a silent? When he could, he offered answers. In other cases, he acknowledged that some answers remain beyond any human understanding.

Philip researched and wrote about the vibrant Jewish societies that were destroyed; from the assimilated Jews of Germany, with all of their secular success and unrequited loyalty to their Fatherland, to the pious and traditionalist Jews of Eastern Europe, many of whom lived in material poverty. Because he was a scrupulous historian, he strove to understand and describe these societies as they truly were, with all their internal divisions and naiveté. Because he was a loyal member of the same family, he also described them with love, respect and understanding. He fiercely defended their reputation against all those who attempted to demean their honor and courage. He would bring the deep knowledge, powerful intellect and fighting spirit to the defence of the Jews of today and of Israel - the Jewish homeland that emerged from the ashes.

There are people would prefer their Holocaust survivors to be quiescent. They are pleased to extend their solemn pity to a hapless and mourning victim. But they are suddenly uncomfortable when a survivor emerges as someone outspoken and assertive; who defends his people and the Jewish state; who names and condemns all the enemies of his people, past and present, together with their well-meaning dupes and apologists.

Philip dove into political and intellectual controversies with wit and self-confidence. In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, Philip loved to be the man in the arena. In public debate, he displayed all the tools of the skilled controversialist. This was the more remarkable for the fact that English was his second language. He was fluent in many forms of humour, including the ironic and the absurd.

Philip spoke at an academic level in his lectures at venues such as universities or interdenominational symposiums. But he also could effortlessly speak in a very down to earth way to classes of schoolchildren. Even in his eighties, he would travel for hours to speak to an assembly at a little school in rural Manitoba.

Philip received many accolades and awards for his educational work. He enjoyed what in Yiddish is called "kuvid" - being honoured. But he was, in the words of the Talmud, the servant who serves without hope of reward. In fact, there were times when he received more than his fair share of what a physicist might call "anti-kuvid". He did more than most, spoke out more than most, and cared more than most - and in returned received more blows than most. Yet he was unrelenting. To the end, he remained committed to his mission.

Philip had no institutional haven, no university or institute, to support his intellectual work. He had to live in the practical business world as well as in the realm of ideas and fundamental belief. And here again he deployed his imagination and courage. He came to

a new country, starting with nothing, a stranger to the language and the culture, and created a small furniture-making business. He suffered failures. He had to start over again more than once, but, as in all things within his control, he overcame all the obstacles and disappointments. Through decades of effort, he made Philip Weiss Furniture a creative and commercial success.

Philip was also devoted to the day to day life of his own little Jewish community. Despite all the other pressures on his time and stamina, he served on committees, even became president of a congregation. He was devoted to his family; to his gentle wife Gertrude; to the brother and sister who had survived the Holocaust; to his children and grandchildren.

When I remember Philip, I remember the words of Rabbi Hillel, who said, "In a land where there are no men, strive to be a man."

And I will remember this story from the scriptures about King David, in one of his most redeeming moments. When facing the mortal illness of his infant son, David fasted and prayed that the child might live. When instead he died, despite all of David's hopes, David rose and carried on with his life. David said, "My son will not return to me, but I will go to him."

Philip Weiss. A man gifted with talent and burdened with sensitivity; seeking God's mercy but so often finding silence; to the end of his days bearing in his soul the memory of not only a lost child, but a million of them; determined, despite everything, to live on as best as he could, a loyal son of his God and his people.