

## **In memory of Moshe Bejski**

*by Carmela Rubin, Massuah, 10.5.07*

His passing deprived my sister Tami and myself of the last first-hand link connecting us to our childhood and to our parents. Moshe was the husband of our cousin Erika, but his presence within our family circle was much more meaningful than one merely the outcome of marriage bonds.

Our parents came to Palestine before the outbreak of the war, literally at the last moment, and it seems to me that in Moshe - who had witnessed the destruction and the loss of so many family members in Europe – they focused all of their emotions and sense of loss. He was at the same time the subject of much “parental” pride in his formidable achievements.

As a girl growing up in Ramat-Gan, I knew nothing of Moshe’s past. I remember that for my birthday – I was 6 or 7 then, I received from Moshe and Erika a very beautiful book, quite exceptional for those days, a historical atlas of Eretz-Yisrael. I remember this book distinctly, not because I was so drawn to geography or to history, the street with all the games and possibilities it offered was far more attractive... it was the dedication written on the opening page that caught my fancy.

Beautiful precious letters, like a string of pearls, made to look like print block-type letters, they were inscribed in Moshe’s eloquent hand-writing.

I had of course no idea then under what circumstances Moshe had mastered this particular skill. Only many years later did I learn that it was when he was engaged in forging official documents to save his own and other peoples’ lives in the camps.

As girls we knew that Moshe had been in a concentration camp, but the first time I ever heard about it first-hand was when he was witness at the Eichmann trial in 1961. As I was still under 16 years of age, and was not allowed to enter the court, I had to make do with watching a televised version screened in the Ratisbon in Jerusalem.

When the court session was over I rushed to meet my parents and Moshe and Erika and we all went to our cousin Rutie’s apartment.

I will never ever forget the sight of Moshe on that day. His complexion grey and blue, he looked like a dead man walking, as though his blood had spilled out of his veins.

I realized that the need to allow his memories to surface, literally pulled him back to hell.

No wonder then that even decades later, when Tami and I tried to convince Moshe to record his past experiences, he declined. He was afraid he wouldn’t be able to cope... if I had children, he openly admitted, maybe I would feel obliged to do it...

Only following his retirement, Moshe finally broke the silence and allowed others to share his account of the past, while continuing to do what he felt was really his mission in life – to help and to commemorate the deeds of the righteous gentiles, heading the committee in Yad Vashem, at the same time developing Massuah and educational programs - for the sake of future generations - on the Shoah.

With today’s perspective, we can only admire the way in which Moshe managed to transform painful past memories locked within, into a humanistic worldview, not

necessarily optimistic, but always positive, one that seeks to find the good in people without ignoring human weaknesses.

Maybe it is after all optimism in a person who did not succumb to all the difficulties, and did not become embittered, rather, he always channeled his energies and abilities to unearthing and recognizing with gratitude the good that people committed.

Erika was always at his side, a full partner in his activities. When disagreements surfaced which ignited discussions that would sometimes even be heated, it was always Erika who was the more passionate, finding it difficult to compromise on issues of social justice, unwilling to overlook, nor forgive wrongdoings.

I must admit that Erika and Moshe's beautiful partnership was something I became aware of only in recent years, it too must have contributed to Moshe's inner strength.

Even in his last months, after the death of Erika, when Moshe was literally confined to his room, we were surprised over and over again by how he held on and how much he loved the company of his friends and relatives. Their visits in the hospital encouraged no doubt his will to live and the energy to go on fighting.

On one of my visits in the early afternoon hours of a hot sticky summer day, we managed to have a long uninterrupted chat. He must have felt a little better, relieved from pain for a change, and the conversation moved freely from family affairs to more general topics of the state of things in Israel. All of that, observed by him from a slightly removed vintage point held by someone by now beyond day-to-day involvement. It was this wider perspective that enabled him - in spite of all - to appreciate the here and the now that we so often wrongly tend to take for granted.

One of the subjects which came up in that conversation, and which remains clear in my mind, is the story about the little Brazilian girl who had been adopted by an Israeli family, only to be reclaimed at a later stage by her biological mother. The court case and the entire fiasco was reviewed extensively in the media. What Moshe shared with me on that afternoon was his moral dilemma which he referred to as the most painful in his professional life, for the decision that he had to reach, guided by the dry law, was opposed to what he felt would be right for the genuine benefit of the little girl.

When I was just about to leave and said good-by, Moshe all of a sudden said to me: "for such a chat it is worth living". I was very touched and walked out of his room sad and gratified, once again admiring Moshe for not losing it during those long months in the hospital, when he was so alone and so uncertain about his condition. His grip on life - with the help of loyal Milla - was something you could only admire, this ability to constantly look for the good, to find the taste of life in little things: a hearty conversation, entertaining a friend and reciting a poem by Gebirtig or Manger or telling a funny/sad Yiddish joke, all little treasures drawn from his private repertoire.

At the same time Moshe continued to follow the news and the events of the day, without a television set in his room, which he stubbornly refused when we repeatedly suggested it to him. He had enough of the news to aggravate him even without the help of a personal T.V in his own room...

His body betrayed but the spirit remained alert and aware, anger and criticism reflecting his deep concern.

Even in the most trying hours, which became painfully frequent in the last few months, Moshe did not allow himself to deteriorate mentally, presenting himself with new challenges. He told us for instance, how during long sleepless nights he would engage himself in memory tests, reciting by heart poems that he loved and which remained close to his heart. Who knows, this may well have been a survival strategy that he had exercised in his youth, that came in handy once again after all these years...

Psychiatrist and writer Viktor Fraenkl, himself a holocaust survivor, wrote in his book "Man in search of Meaning" that ... "the inner strength of a human being can elevate him beyond his outer destiny". It would seem that Moshe Bejsky's life-story is a fit manifestation.

We miss Moshe very much but at the same time I know that he will continue to be with us and our children not only as a beloved and endeared relation, but as one whose mere being enhances our life here with moral added value.