

DAVID ABRAMOWITZ

Ben-Zion Shek
1927-2011



Ben's parents, Bella and Sol, emigrated from Poland to mandate Palestine where Ben-Zion Shek was born in June, 1927. Because they were disenchanted with circumstances there at the time they returned to Poland. Yet, as things were also not promising in Poland, and because Bella and Sol had family here, they migrated to Toronto in 1934.

Seven-year-old Ben found a vibrant Yiddishist left-wing community that first summer at the Labour League's Camp Naivelt; the subsequent kinship lasted for 77 years in several branches of the organization.

During his high school years at Harbord Collegiate, Ben participated in a summer Yiddish teachers' training course at Camp Naivelt in 1943, after which, with several Harbord colleagues, he taught at the Morris Winchevsky School. He was my grade two teacher in 1944; I've known Ben for 67 years.

His parents, joined the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO), successor to the Labour League, and the Frayhayt Gezangs Fareyn (the Freedom Singing Society, now the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir).

Ben attended the University of Toronto, and, subsequently, became a high school teacher. With his spirit of social responsibility and activism Ben participated in left-wing youth organizations and activities, becoming the leader of the first Canadian delegation to the Federation of World Youth Conference. He was the English page co-editor, and later editor, of the Canadian-Jewish Weekly (*Vochenblat*) and editor of "Champion" the newspaper of the National Federation of Labour Youth (*NFLY*).

Probably because of these and similar activities he was clandestinely persecuted by the Canadian security establishment resulting in his firing as a teacher. Not to be a victim-loser, Ben furthered his university studies acquiring his PhD. in French and subsequently, developed into a popular French professor at the U of T, thus triumphing over those who had persecuted him.

Romance didn't elude Ben either. He had very high standards I learned. But when Ben met Jean Alderwood, he found his ideal. They did nothing to refrain from having a family; Jean's planned pregnancy resulted in a son, Elliot. To ensure their ideal family would be achieved they chose to adopt and were very proud of their new daughter Ghitta; now their family was complete.

Ben and Jean had joined Ben's parents in the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir and later became among its significant supporters and leaders as its older generations succumbed to natural forces. Long after retirement Ben continued to mentor many U of T students. The U of T, Jewish music, and French were three of Ben's other loves.

It would take too long to list his numerous awards and honours here. As a retired Professor Emeritus of French, possibly his most proud achievement and honour was the recognition of his dedicated pedagogical skills and contribution to Canadian society when he was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He authored two books on Québécois literature as well as twice being Associate Editor of the "University of Toronto Quarterly". Till now he was also an Associate Editor for *Outlook* Magazine to which he contributed and also reviewed Jewish films.

He was interviewed on radio and television — some are still available in archival collections that you might find on the web. He hosted radio and TV interviews.

He and Jean visited Cuba more than 30 times together and, on several occasions, Ben taught courses on French-Canadian literature there. He acquired a difficult to obtain electron microscope for the children's optical hospital in Havana whose director he and Jean hosted on her visits to Canada.

He's lectured internationally on the role of the French-Canadian novel in Quebec and in Canadian society; he wrote articles and papers on French-Canadian (and French-Canadian Jewish) writers and English and Jewish writers from Quebec.

For a couple of decades Ben was a highly regarded secretary of UJPO-Canada who would often have difficulty reading his own written notes to transcribe them into minutes. At the time of his death he was UJPO-Canada's Vice-President.

Above all, he was a truly great "Mentsh" — a humanist "par excellence", unwilling to compromise his principles for anything, which sometimes made him seem like a curmudgeon. His signing of numerous petitions for progressive causes in which he ardently believed, his attendance at peace marches and demonstrations of many types, even when in poor health, whether they were anti-war or for Middle-East peace, epitomizes how he was dedicated to and sought to uphold his secular, humanist, and progressive principles and to contribute to make this a better, more just world for all.

And to those who were fortunate to be closer to him, whether a life-long friend and ally or a more recent colleague, he was the truest friend one could have, checking to see how you were if he had learned you were under-the-weather, visiting those with more serious ailments, and encouraging a speedy recovery — something none of us were able to do for him given his many increasingly complex health challenges in recent months and weeks.

To Elliot and Ghitta, our condolences on your, and our, mutual profound loss. Though we will miss him immeasurably, he still will exist in our memories and influence our conduct, and, in honouring his name and reputation, his influence will live on in those whom he affected, and I hope, will thus be passed on to future generations.

And, as nature continues to take its course, it's not farewell, dear friend, but "au revoir".

Ben-Zion Shek died Sunday 26 June 2011 at Sunnybrook Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

*Drafted by David Abramowitz
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