

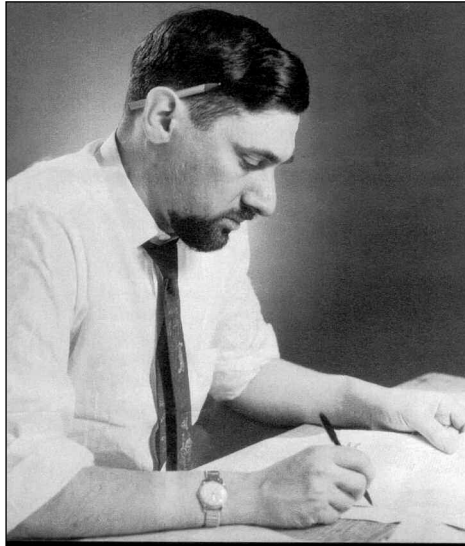
Memorial Evening to Abe Arnold

By Harriet Zaidman

The poster advertising the memorial for Abe Arnold showed the historian, journalist and human rights activist concentrating on his writing, with a pencil perched behind his ear, ready to edit. It was a representative photo of a man who worked tirelessly all his life to build a better world. Abe, who died on January 28, 2011, was fittingly honoured on September 22 in the Bernie Theatre at the Rady Centre in Winnipeg.

More than 100 family members, friends and colleagues applauded as Abe was posthumously given the Citizen Activist Award by Neil Cohen of the Joseph Zuken Memorial Foundation, an organization of which Abe was a board member for more than 20 years. The Citizen Activist Award reflects the legacy of the late Winnipeg city councillor who worked unflinchingly throughout his life to improve his community, qualities that Abe also displayed.

Roz Usiskin, president of Winnipeg UJPO, told the gathering that Abe plunged into community work when he and his wife Bertha moved from Vancouver in the early 1960s with their three children. For Canada's Centennial in 1967, Abe collected documents, photographs and interviews to showcase the contributions of Jews to the nation's fabric. That was the beginning of the Jewish Historical Society—now the Jewish Heritage Society of Western Canada—a prototype for other communities and the



beginning of multicultural historiography.

Usiskin described Abe as courageous. "He inspired us to withstand McCarthyism," she said, and followed up his ideas with his pen. "He helped make *Outlook* relevant, with analytical articles, history, poetry and literary content." With his late daughter Frances, Abe helped establish the Sholem Aleichem Community in Winnipeg, a cross-generational group with Jewish content and humanist values, that celebrated Jewish culture and holidays. Abe and Bertha also worked together with others to form the Joseph Zuken Memorial Foundation after Zuken's death in 1985.

Master of Ceremonies Nolan Reilly, of the Oral History Centre at the University of Winnipeg, said he was "struck by how full Abe's life was," and credited Bertha with playing an important role in Abe's

work over the 66 years of their marriage. Abe was full of ideas, committed to history, and proud of his role as a founding member of the Manitoba Association of Rights and Liberties, he recalled. When Reilly first met Abe in 1978, Abe immediately gave him a list of things he should be doing in his work as a professor of labour history. "It came out of his commitment to building a better world."

Dan Stone, senior scholar at the University of Winnipeg and the current chair of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, addressed the gathering. Stone spoke of Abe's "engagement with history, his energy, good sense, firm opinions and trenchant presentation." He recalled his published essay *The Contribution of Jews to the Opening of the West*, his essay on artist William Kurelek, and his research into early Jewish life in Quebec and British Columbia. Stone said that Abe's careful and prodigious research about the development of Jewish humanism is contained at the Manitoba Archives, a service to historians.

Nolan Reilly recorded eight hours of interviews with Abe for an oral history project. Reilly said that Abe's exceptional powers of recall "painted the picture" of his life. He showed a presentation that documented Abe's life from his

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standing of an event requires that it be situated in its full context, framed within the maze of cultural and other elements in which it is embedded and which conditioned it. But if CMHR's intent is to draw lessons and celebrate progress, it might be impossible to do all this and still take from the event the lesson desired. Will the museum be able to focus on human rights and still be true to history? Will it present the rich and ambiguous context in which all significant events are embedded? Or will today's morality and political correctness violate the integrity of the past?

The completed museum may also face criticism on the ground that the toleration and understanding it seeks to promote are Western values, not human rights. What we regard as beneficent, some cultures see as dangerous. Recently the U.S. opened an "Office of International Religious Freedom," and there is talk that Canada may follow suit. The mission of this office is to promote religious freedom as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy. Some fear that the new office is a cover for promoting the spread of Christianity. Some think this fine, but others see it as the imposition of alien values, cultural colonialism, or even as cultural genocide.

Should all "values" be respected just because they are in the fabric of a culture? Some non-Western cultures oppose equal rights for women because gender equality conflicts with their social and family values. CMHR encourages the appreciation of differing points of view, but our governments are often reluctant to open debates. Will the museum follow the government of the day on such issues? CMHR has refrained from

defining "human rights," preferring to use that term as an umbrella for a variety of issues affecting human beings everywhere. But in so doing it risks the confusion of human rights with civil and constitutional rights, which vary widely across the globe. Will the Canadian perspective promised by CMHR respect differences we find offensive? Or will it assert the superiority of values we might see as "human rights" but which other cultures find unacceptable?

A museum which purports to address so wide a range of issues as does CMHR is bound to displease some groups and organizations both by what it omits and how it treats what it includes. Despite its repeated disclaimers that it is not a "museum of genocides," the public may still view CMHR as an institution for showcasing historic wrongs suffered by ethnic groups in our population. And no matter how much the museum tries to focus on "rights" rather than "wrongs," we wouldn't be so concerned about rights if it weren't for all the wrongs. But too much emphasis on suffering will not be attractive. Since the museum seeks to promote progress in human rights, too many displays devoted to atrocities might only convince viewers that progress is impossible. On the other hand, the museum's "celebration of human rights heroes" could provide encouragement and education as long as the celebration doesn't become self-congratulatory and lead to complacency. But whatever the balance between its use and abuse of history, or the gap between its ideals of human rights and our human rights record, the museum's presence will be an enduring reminder of the hopes that inspired its building, and an admonition to strive for their realization. ♦

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beginnings in Montreal, where at age eight he began writing for a bulletin at the YMHA, which eventually led to his work with the Jewish World News Service and the *Jewish Western Bulletin* in Vancouver. (Abe also edited the English page of the *Vocheblatt*, the Yiddish forerunner of *Canadian Jewish Outlook*.) Reilly described the anti-Semitic and McCarthyite tensions with which Abe struggled as a journalist in the 1950s. There were conflicts within the Jewish community, too, over how the Holocaust should be presented and over the participation of UJPO in the Vancouver Jewish Council, a battle that was lost in 1953.

But society recognized Abe's contribution in later years. He received a Human Rights Award in 1994, followed by an Honourary Degree from the University of Winnipeg, as well as the Order

of Canada.

Abe's daughter Shelley received the Citizen Activist Award on behalf of the family, and son Mark delivered a personal tribute to his father. He said his father left a legacy that included three things: that our differences and rights to be treated equally and free of discrimination are now enshrined in law, a vast collection of Jewish historical work, and eight wonderful great grandchildren, whose lineages stem from cultures the world over—Canadian aboriginal, China, India, Trinidad, Romania, Hungary and more—Abe's family a healthy model of the multicultural society that he envisioned for Canada.

The North End Jewish Folk Choir sang some of Abe's favourite songs, and a reception followed where everyone exchanged memories of Abe and his life well-lived. His efforts to create a *besere un shenere velt* are an inspiration to those left behind. ♦