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Obituary: Gerda Frieberg, 97, a Holocaust survivor who was a dynamo in education and community activism in Toronto

/ Ron Csillag

Gerda Frieberg, an outspoken, energetic and pioneering advocate for Holocaust education and Jewish causes, died at her home in Toronto on Jan. 3. She was 97.

For years in local Jewish circles, the name “Gerda,” on its own, was often enough to conjure an image of a whirlwind in perpetual motion, whether it was raising funds or organizing meetings for a wide variety of Jewish and human rights causes.

Widely accomplished and known for her chutzpah and tenacity, she was perhaps most closely associated with memorializing the Holocaust, which she had survived, and educating young people about it. She began speaking about the Shoah as early as 1962, first in local schools, then across Canada.

She went on to chair the committee that created Toronto’s Holocaust Education and Memorial Centre (now the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre).

She called it the highlight of 43 years of volunteerism that included State of Israel Bonds, the campaign for Soviet Jewry, the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem, B’nai Brith Women, and the Ontario Cabinet Roundtable on Anti-Racism.

Fellow Holocaust survivor and educator Nate Leipziger said he met Frieberg in 1980, when the two began plans for a Holocaust memorial centre in Toronto. He remembered her “dedication and ability to cut through bureaucratic obstacles, and get things done.”

Leipziger recalled “a fantastic orator (who) usually spoke without notes. Her message was always positive and inspiring. She challenged her audiences to action and never to abandon the memory of those we lost in the Shoah.”

The Holocaust Education and Memorial Centre opened in September 1985.

As chair of the Ontario region of the now-defunct Canadian Jewish Congress in the early 1990s, Frieberg was the public face of and spokesperson for a variety of major events and Jewish news stories. Even before that, she was a go-to for reporters who needed to interview a Holocaust survivor.

Bernie Farber, the former CEO of the CJC, recalled that around 1992, Frieberg insisted on accompanying him to Toronto City Hall to lay a complaint against Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel and Wolfgang Droege, leader of the far-right Heritage Front, who were both scheduled to speak there.

“As we approached Nathan Phillips Square, and with media in tow, she walked directly up to both Droege and Zundel,” Farber told The CJN. “She went eye to eye with them—I will never forget this—and uttered something in German. Then she turned to the press and said, ‘I told them there is no room for the three of us here and I have no intention of leaving!’” The two men turned and walked away.

Recalled Farber: “She would always say to me, ‘those bastards are not getting away with their mishigas on my watch.’” Frieberg seemed to delight in describing herself as “a troublemaker,” but she made education, philanthropy and human rights priorities.

For the Toronto Holocaust Centre, she led fundraising by holding private salons and securing support from the provincial and federal governments, said Dara Solomon, the centre’s executive director. Frieberg also procured loans of artifacts from international institutions, Solomon added.

“Gerda inspired thousands of students with her testimony and she also inspired many survivors to join the centre as Survivor Speakers,” Solomon said. “I was always so moved when she spoke, as she was both passionate and incredibly articulate.”

Frieberg’s work at the centre paved the way for the new state-of-the-art Toronto Holocaust Museum, scheduled to open this spring, Solomon said.

Hers was a rags-to-riches story, eulogized her son, Jack, at Frieberg’s funeral on Jan. 5. She was born Gerda Steinitz on Oct. 12, 1925 in the mostly German-speaking Polish village of Bielschowitz, in Upper Silesia. The village was once part of Germany and only one kilometer from the German border. They were the sole Jewish family in the village, and Gerda attended religious school on the German side of the frontier.

Her father, Josef, ran a general store and freely extended credit to customers who toiled in the mines. She recalled a happy childhood. “My earliest memory of tzedakah was when my mother would send us to deliver food to needy Jewish elderly in the neighbouring town,” Frieberg reminisced in an online archive of the Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto.

The family witnessed the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany. “They were left without food or shelter so my mother offered our kitchen to prepare meals and we helped to deliver them.”

On a trip to visit an aunt in Berlin during the 1936 summer Olympics, she caught a glimpse of the U.S. sprinter Jesse Owens. It was the first Black face she ever saw. From aboard a bus one day, she also witnessed a limousine carrying Adolf Hitler and his entourage on their way to a function. Traffic stopped. The arms of bystanders and the bus passengers all snapped into the Nazi salute, amid cries of “Heil Hitler!”

The young Frieberg realized something: “My grandfather was buried with military honours but I don’t belong here anymore,” she recounted in video testimony for Crestwood Preparatory College’s oral history project.

Two years later, in the German town of Hindenburg, just across the border, she witnessed synagogues and Jewish schools aflame, Torah scrolls and prayer books dumped onto the streets, and broken glass everywhere during the country-wide pogrom known as Kristallnacht.

It was “a very rude awakening for a 13-year-old,” remarked her son. Indeed, the episode was seared into her memory. In a reminiscence for Postmedia in 2017, she recalled that horrible day in November, 1938:

“My father knocked on a door of a family friend, an elderly woman, but no one answered. So we went back to (his) motorcycle. And I can still see this, even after so many years. I can still see this...the curtain was slightly parted and the lady was looking out, and so we went back and knocked. The Nazis had come in the middle of the night looking for her husband. She told them he had never returned from the First World War and that he had fought for Germany. They

called her a lying Jew and threw her down the stairs. She was blue with bruises. They trashed her apartment. We left.”

In October 1939, just one month after the Second World War began, Frieberg’s father was picked up but was able to return home for a time before being deported again. Meantime, Frieberg, her sister Hana, and their mother Elfrieda were shipped in 1940 to the Jaworzno Ghetto in southern Poland and, on the last day of Passover 1942, Frieberg was sent to the Ober Alstadt labour camp in Czechoslovakia, where she worked in the machine shop of a spinning mill. She later noted that she had spent precisely 1,123 days there.

The family received letters from Josef until early 1945. They learned after the war that he likely died of typhus at the Gross-Rosen death camp, which had been the parent camp of where his wife and two daughters had been.

After liberation in May, 1945, Frieberg, her sister and mother spent four years in a displaced persons camp in Landsberg, near Munich, where Frieberg became a proficient seamstress. It was also where she met her husband, Louis Frieberg, a fellow Polish survivor.

In all, Frieberg lost 172 members of her family. She, her sister and mother were the only survivors.

Having met David Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the Jewish Agency, who had toured the DP camps to raise morale and enlist support for a Jewish state, Frieberg, her mother and husband-to-be made their way to fledgling Israel in 1949. She and Louis wed there that year, but the clan left three years later for Toronto, where he plied his craft as a carpenter and Gerda hers as a seamstress, earning 70 cents per dress in a sweatshop on Spadina Avenue. She spoke no English.

Within a few years, they’d founded their own construction company and, as a 2014 Maclean’s profile on Frieberg noted, “rode Ontario’s late-century development wave to prosperity.” Their son went on to own the building where his mother had sewed.

In a full life, she traveled extensively and her athleticism was renowned. She hiked, kayaked, sailed, canoed and cycled. She was fierce at tennis, and played often with the late Rabbi Gunther Plaut, disputing shots and keeping score in German. Her family noted that she skied for eight decades.

She became a licensed pilot in her mid-40s, flying Shabbat goodies to her son in university in London, Ont. She later obtained her demanding Instrument Rating. At an Acapulco resort, she boldly strode up to Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, who were relaxing at the pool, to ask a question that had been bothering her: What direction would a compass point if you were at the North Pole?

Over the decades, said her son Jack, she spoke to tens of thousands of people at universities, churches, synagogues, schools, at Roy Thomson Hall, in front of Parliament in Ottawa and at Queen’s Park in Toronto, and at Holocaust survivors gatherings all over the continent.

“When she spoke, not only you could hear a pin drop, you also could hear tears drop, as she had an amazing way of reaching into the hearts of those that were fortunate to hear her,” Jack Frieberg eulogized.

“She always said she had no regrets, and she definitely did it her way, by hook or by crook, through the front door or the back,” he went on. “She accomplished what few could in a lifetime.”

Frieberg self-published two memoirs, 2013’s *I Kept My Promise*, in which she recalled her family’s story, followed up two years later with *Never a Bystander*, which began with her arrival in Canada in 1953.

She echoed the title of the second volume in 2016, when she joined other well-known Holocaust survivors at a press conference in To-

ronto to urge the world to intervene in atrocities being committed in Syria. “We must not become bystanders,” Frieberg said. “We can make a difference. Let our voices be heard.”

Her husband died in 2009. She is survived by her children, Josey Frieberg and Jack Frieberg, six grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren.

In one of several interviews with The CJN over the years, Frieberg reflected on her life and its meaning. “I considered my survival a gift to be dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Shoah,” she said. “Amid the silence of the world, the plea of the victims, ‘Remember us,’ became a commandment.” ■

Ron Csillag is the reporter emeritus for The CJN.

Obituary: Jerry Gross, 96, was one of the last surviving overseas volunteers who fought for Israel in the 1948 war

/ Janice Arnold

Joseph “Jerry” Gross, one of the few surviving *machalniks*, overseas volunteers who fought in Israel’s 1948 War of Independence, died in Montreal on Jan. 14. He was 96.

Gross was among 268 Canadians, most of them Second World War veterans like him, who joined with natives of British Mandate Palestine in the fight to secure the nascent Jewish state. He became a successful businessman, but maintained a strong link with his fellow *machalniks* around the world.

He served in the underground Haganah’s elite Givati 52nd Brigade.

Gross notably participated in the fierce battle at Latrun on May 25, 1948, 10 days after the State of Israel was declared, to free besieged Jerusalem.

The retreating British left the road between the coastal plain and Jerusalem, which was overlooked by an ancient hilltop fortress, in the hands of the Jordanians who blockaded it.

Gross, whose unit acted as a reserve force to the vanguard, described the battle as a “slaughter” and a “bloodbath” with the defenders of Israel heavily outgunned by the Arab foes.

In a 2018 videotaped interview with *Toldot Yisrael*, Gross said the charge was launched by recently arrived Holocaust refugees from Eastern Europe who did not have the necessary military experience. Gross said probably half of the 300 or so frontline fighters were killed.

The three-hour recording is archived in Israel’s National Library.

Seventy years later, Gross still welled up thinking of what he and his fellow Canadian volunteers witnessed. Behind the action, they looked on helplessly as they sheltered in the forest, artillery shelling shrieking over their heads.

They could do nothing because they did not have the weaponry that could match that of the Jordanians, he said.

Gross was born in Montreal in 1926 to Yiddish-speaking

Ukrainian immigrants and grew up in the Jewish district around St. Laurent Boulevard. He never finished high school and went to work in his family's modest fur business.

He remembers encountering a good deal of antisemitism as a youth on the street.

Called up to serve when he was 18 in 1944, Gross trained for the tank corps at Camp Borden in Ontario. On account of his having flat feet, he remained at the base and worked as an office clerk.

One day an officer demanded coffee, calling him a "Jew boy." Gross complied but when he returned with the cup, he threw the coffee in the man's face.

At his court-martial, he told the presiding brigadier-general that he assaulted the officer because of the antisemitic slur. Gross related that it so happened this high-ranking officer had seen the death camps in Europe and immediately dismissed the case.

Postwar, Gross returned to the family business. In 1947, at a Jewish branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, he heard that Israel-in-the-making needed people with wartime experience.

With little hesitation and over his parents' objections, Gross volunteered explaining simply, "be a Jew—that's it."

The Montreal volunteers joined other Canadian *machalniks* in New York and sailed to the north of France from where they were bussed to the port city of Marseille. In the nearby mountains the group of about 45 was trained—without arms—by a representative of the Palmach, Haganah's premier unit, for about two weeks.

A group of religious Hungarian Jews was their "front" in case the French authorities looked into what they were doing.

The Canadians, provided with false documents, then sailed to Haifa and, according to Gross, had no trouble entering the land because the British customs officer had been "paid off" by the Israeli government-in-waiting.

Gross's chief role was assisting the scout carrying out reconnaissance.

Based in Rehovot, the brigade's first action was defending a kibbutz against Arab looters. Gross recalled that his fellow Montrealer Sidney Cadloff lost a leg in that conflict, despite Gross's efforts to stem his bleeding with a tourniquet.

Gross was also involved in the protection of what would be the border with Egypt in southern Israel, his battalion again facing an enemy with far superior firepower.

Later, Gross was assigned to the navy because of his knowledge of how to mount guns, that he had learned with tanks.

He found himself in the midst of the so-called Altalena Affair, a controversial episode in the young Jewish state's history. The new government ordered the Israel Defense Forces to capture an arms ship owned by the still underground Irgun paramilitary organization.

Gross refused to fire on his fellow Jews and was jailed. However, he joked about that week or so in detention. He was never actually restrained and spent convivial nights having a drink with his guards.

After returning to Montreal in late 1948 (he remembers neighbours on their balconies welcoming him home), Gross started his own business manufacturing furniture.

He and his late wife Etta Silverman were married for 69 years and raised five children.

Gross was a handsome man, whose matinee-idol looks drew comparisons to Clark Gable. He was known for his outsized personality, and as a bon vivant with a constant smile and twinkle in his eye.

He loved to talk and hold parties, was a snappy dresser and drove a Cadillac convertible.

He made many Israeli friends during 1947-1948 that he kept over the years. "It was the greatest time of my life," said Gross, who downplayed his personal role.

Gross never missed a Yom ha-Zikaron commemoration for Israel's soldiers, saying, "My prime concern is not to allow their memory to fade away." ■

Janice Arnold has been reporting for The CJNI from Montreal since 1976.

Tribute: Jules Kronis, 79, a lawyer who brought his Jewish values to Canadian politics

Jules Kronis died in Toronto on Jan. 11, 2023. This is an edited version of the eulogy delivered by his daughter Tamara Kronis.

Jules Neil Kronis was born in Toronto, the only son of Sam and Anne Kronis. But the seeds of my father's identity were planted a generation earlier when three brothers and a sister came to Canada from Eastern Europe. Two of those brothers were cabinet makers, and they settled in the Junction which at the time, was its own town. Their names were Naftali and Abraham, and they married two sisters, Sima and Sarah Bookman, who came to Toronto from Philadelphia with their parents. Together, the Jews of the Junction hand-built an incredible synagogue, Knesset Israel, the Junction shul, which remains the oldest purpose-built synagogue building still used as a synagogue in Ontario today, and truly one of the most beautiful.

On the other side of the family, my father's grandparents, Judah—for whom my father was named—and Fanny Finkelstone lived in Glasgow where they had two children, Phil and Anne. Tragedy struck, and Judah perished in the 1919 flu pandemic leaving the family destitute. And so, Fanny brought 14-year-old Phil and nine-year-old Anne to Canada, hoping for a better life. They landed in Quebec City on June 17, 1927, as third-class passengers and made their way to Toronto.

My uncle Phil had a massive influence on my father's life. The Jewish community in Toronto was mostly poor at that time, and my uncle Phil had to drop out of school to support the family. Anne grew up and married my grandfather Sam, and my father grew up in a one-bedroom apartment on College Street with his parents and his grandmother Fanny.

Uncle Phil was a role model and mentor to my dad—proof that a good life could be built with hard work. Uncle Phil taught himself to type and became a DJ at CHUM where he played the first rock 'n' roll song in Canada. Uncle Phil ultimately became a vice-president at the station, he knew a ton of people, and he took care of his

nephew. And so, when my father was just 10 years old and had to become the breadwinner in his own household, Uncle Phil got my dad a job selling programs at Maple Leaf Gardens. My father said that job saved his life.

He sold programs at the Gardens for 16 years—through middle school, high school, and law school, doggedly working his way up through the crew to get to a good position by the entrance to the Gardens where the most program-sales money could be made. Dad sold programs at the Gardens until the night before he was called to the bar.

He also sold women's shoes at some point, which is unfathomable to anyone who ever saw dad's wardrobe, but is nonetheless part of the story of my dad's bloody-minded determination to build a better life for himself and his family.

My dad had a lot of stories from when he was working at the Gardens. The boys selling programs could leave their bags in one of the stadium's rooms during the games, but they had to come get them before the beginning of the third period. One night, when my dad went to get his bag, he found himself slammed up against the wall upon leaving the room. Once he got his wits back, he realized he had been sidelined by a secret service agent because he was about a foot away from Bobby Kennedy who had come to the game as a guest of John Bassett's.

One of my dad's other favourite stories from the Gardens from when he was in law school was the time that Dougie Bassett shouted over to my dad from the family box: "Hey Kronis, are you going to keep selling programs when you become a QC?"

My dad was a busy young man in those days. Warren Rumack, my dad's friend of 70 years, recalls that in high school, my dad would meet some of his classmates for pool or pizza after selling programs at the Gardens and then go home and do his trig homework late into the night.

They were all poor. Warren and my dad toasted their 21st birthdays with tomato juice because they didn't have enough money to get something more interesting. But what they did have was determination and moxie.

Warren remembers that dad's signature line when he was selling programs was "Sorry, I don't have any change." With the money he made, my dad bought my grandparents the house they lived in. He paid that mortgage off the week before he married my mom.

In those years, my dad was also active in an all-Jewish troop of boy scouts that met every Tuesday night at Clinton Street Public School with his good friend Michael Wyman. In her memoirs, Michael's mother Mildred Wyman of blessed memory recounts how Michael and my dad and some other boys tried to earn a difficult badge called "The Bushman's Thong."

Armed with a map, a compass, two matches and a potato, the boys were dropped off in Haliburton and told to locate a cache of food in a hidden thicket. They were required to make camp and cook their meal before nightfall, then set out by dawn the next day to find a rendezvous point. As Mildred recounts, it took hours of searching for clues to find the supplies which turned out to be several live chickens that had to be caught, slaughtered and cooked to make dinner which they could not even eat because the chickens were not kosher.

Mike and my dad became the second and third Jewish boys to become Queen Scouts in Canada and were rewarded with spots on the Canadian Scouting delegation to the World Jamboree in 1959 in the Philippines. Rabbi David Monson, of blessed memory, who

would later officiate at my parents' wedding, sent Michael and my dad a care package so that they would have kosher food.

My father had many, many achievements in his life, but the one he remained proudest of until the end was becoming a Queen's Scout. And, being able to fit into his boy scout uniform well into his 40s.

My dad attended King Edward Public School and then Harbord Collegiate, where he was on the basketball team, and then he earned a bachelor of commerce and a law degree from University of Toronto. Somewhere along that journey, my father became involved in Hillel and the Hart House Debate Committee, and it was there that he got hooked on politics.

He got involved in the youth wing of the Conservatives and became fast friends with a young woman named Maureen McTeer. Maureen ultimately met and married a man named Joe Clark, and from there followed numerous meetings, events, and campaigns.

This brings me back to the parshah, to Shemot. At the time of the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt, the sages teach that the Jews of the time were close to being completely assimilated into Egyptian culture. In fact, they were so assimilated that some of the angels are said to have objected to rescuing them. But one of the reasons that God ultimately decided that the Jews of Egypt were worth saving was that they kept their Jewish names. In short, no matter their success in Egyptian society, they remembered that they were Jews. This encapsulates who my father was in politics.

While he was certainly on deck to help with anything, my father came to politics as a Jew first and never stopped being a fierce advocate for the Jewish community. My dad helped bring Jews to Canada, he helped bring politicians to Israel, he wrote letters and he pushed Canadian governments—Conservative and otherwise—to stand shoulder to shoulder with Canadian Jewry and with Israel.

He did all of that while playing an active role in Canadian Jewish organizations and pushing them to play an active role in politics and law. When Frank Dimant and Pearl Gladman came to visit my dad in the hospital, they recounted how my dad convinced B'nai Brith to be represented at the Deschenes Commission, the inquiry on war criminals in Canada, and helped raise the money to make that possible. With Rabbi Barry Schneider of Beth Emeth and others, he helped build the synagogue at Sunnybrook Hospital. With Bill Attewell, Joe Clark, Ron Atkey and others, he worked tirelessly to get Soviet Jews and others at imminent risk of death to Canada in the late 1980s.

And he did all of this while building a law firm and a career. Dad graduated from UofT law school in 1968, and articulated at Rosenfeld Schwartz before building a law firm with Jack Rotztain and Arnold Sommers. Sommers, Kronis and Rotztain went through a few iterations on its way to being KRMC, and my dad, Jack, Arnold, Andrea and Bruce certainly had their ups and downs, but they have built quite a legacy, one that we are all proud of and that supports so many households today.

My dad conducted himself with incredible integrity at all times. He believed you had nothing if you didn't have your good name, and so he never put his good name at risk. As Toronto mayor John Tory wrote in a note to my dad while he was in palliative care: "You have come through 50-plus years in politics liked and respected by everyone without exception and with your integrity totally intact. There aren't many people who can say that."

In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Shimon said:

“There are three crowns: the crown of torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name supersedes them all.”

Jules Kronis had both a good name and a good soul.

A few months ago, I got a text from a classmate I hadn’t heard from in at least 20 years. He was staying at a yeshiva hesder in Ma’alot and there was a plaque on his dorm room that read “In Honour of Frances and Jules Kronis, Our Children, Tamara Kronis and Martin Traub-Werner, Jennifer and Jeremy Simon, Sarah Kronis and Yacov Artom. Our Grandchildren, Sam, Joel, Av, Maya, Avishai, Judah and Nadav.” What’s your connection to the yeshiva?” he asked. “I have no idea,” I replied.

But this is a quintessential Jules Kronis experience. The yeshivas and synagogues of both Canada and Israel are riddled with chairs, windows, Torahs, and plaques that are a testament to my parent’s generosity. Sure enough though, I was digging through boxes in my parent’s basement last night I found a file labelled “Yeshivat Hesder—Maalot”.

I slept at the hospital for the first few weeks that dad was in palliative care. We are incredibly grateful to the PSWs, nurses and doctors for the care he received, and particularly so to all those who staffed the registration desk and checked in the hordes of visitors—there were so many visitors that Sunnybrook actually ran out of visitor stickers.

One evening, I was sitting with my dad. “You know it’s incredible,” he said to me, “I can’t believe how far we’ve come. Not bad for a kid from College Street.”

The seeds of my father’s personal history were planted in the Junction, took root on College Street, were nurtured at the UofT, blossomed on Delhi Avenue in the old riding of Armourdale, and grew like the most stubborn of invasive shrubs on Timberlane Drive. But like all things in nature, we are ephemeral, and later today, we will restore my dad to the earth in the cemetery of the Junction shul, returning him to his parents and the one-of-a-kind cast of characters that reside on Lambton Road. ■

Obituary: Michael Marrus, 81, was a globally renowned scholar of the Holocaust—primarily based at the University of Toronto

/ Ron Csillag

Michael Marrus, the dean of Holocaust scholars in Canada and part of an international effort to pry open the Vatican’s war-era archives, died in Toronto on Dec. 23. He was 81 and had been in ill health.

Recalled for the clarity of his speaking style, formidable scholarship, sense of humour, and sartorial splendor (signature bowties and hats), he was a professor of modern Euro-

pean history and taught at the University of Toronto for 49 years. He was also a research fellow and taught at St. Antony’s College at Oxford University; the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem; at the University of California at Los Angeles; and at the University of Cape Town. He was the inaugural holder of the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Chair of Holocaust Studies at UofT.

“For many, his courses were a seminal part of their university experience,” his death notice stated. “Through his teachings, research, and numerous award-winning books and publications, Michael advanced scholarship on the Holocaust, refugees, assimilation, Zionism, and antisemitism.”

He served as a governor of UofT for 19 years and as dean of graduate studies for seven years.

Marrus authored several well-received books on the Holocaust, including *The Holocaust in History, Lessons of the Holocaust*, and co-wrote, with famed U.S. historian Robert O. Paxton, a seminal book on war-era France, *Vichy France and the Jews*.

When the volume was first published in France in 1981, the reaction was “explosive,” noted Stanford University Press. “Before the appearance of this groundbreaking book, the question of the Vichy regime’s cooperation with the Third Reich had been suppressed.”

Marrus and Paxton were the first to access closed archives that revealed the extent of Vichy France’s complicity in the Nazi effort to eliminate the Jews.

Since the book’s original publication, additional archives have been opened and France’s role in the deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps “is now openly acknowledged,” according to the publisher. A second edition of the book was printed in 2019.

Marrus’s overall output, “with its broad perspectives, scrupulous documentation, and moral engagement, stands among the foundation stones of modern Jewish historiography,” Paxton, a professor emeritus of social science at Columbia University, wrote in an email to The CJN.

Marrus was “a titan, an acclaimed historian of France, the Holocaust and European Jewish history,” fellow Canadian historian Frank Bialystok told The CJN. “His writing was incisive, (he was) a brilliant professor and a mentor to generations of students, an erudite speaker, a great Canadian whose imprint is etched into the fabric of our nation.”

A leading voice on the subject, Marrus was named to the International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission to examine the role of the Vatican during the Holocaust, amid a long-standing debate that the war-era pope, Pius XII, had turned a blind eye to Nazi atrocities.

In 1999, the Vatican finally invited a team of six Jewish scholars, Marrus among them, and six Catholic experts to examine 11 volumes of material relating to the Holocaust.

As the *Catholic Register* noted at the time, the scholars surrendered to the Vatican’s stonewalling. “By mutual agreement, the academics abandoned the project because of the limitations of only partial access to the archives.”

Indeed, the commission disbanded after just two years. As Marrus told The Canadian Jewish News in 2020, it “ran up against a brick wall” after the Vatican released that first batch of material but remained steadfastly quiet on further queries,

contained in 47 specific questions the commission posed about the Holy See's response to the Holocaust.

It was a frustrating experience, Marrus conceded.

"We were unable to persuade the Vatican that it was in its interest, and the interests of historical truth, to release these documents," he said. He also urged the Vatican to delay making Pius a saint until his reputation was cleared.

In March 2020, the Vatican finally announced that it would unseal its archives on the wartime pope, but by then, Marrus did not feel up to diving into the thousands of letters, cables and speeches covering the papacy of Pius XII from 1939 to 1958, a task that would take years.

"I'm ready to pass the torch to another generation," he told *The CJN*.

The responsibility was passed to Western University historian Robert Ventresca, who completed his PhD under Marrus. Ventresca did a brief research trip to the Vatican in 2019 but has had to rely on local researchers since the COVID pandemic.

"He taught me and countless others the importance of integrity, clarity, and moral purpose in scholarship, inspired by a relentless, unapologetic pursuit of historical truths," Ventresca wrote in an email to *The CJN*. Marrus "insisted that we recognize the uniqueness of the Holocaust in history but cautioned us from thinking of it as an event outside of history, somehow evading true understanding.

"Above all, Marrus taught us by example—showing up day in and day out to do the work of the historian's craft with integrity and a sense of purpose."

As for Marrus's work on the Vatican, "he wasn't afraid of moral judgments of the Vatican's role in the Holocaust," Ventresca said. "But (he) wanted our moral evaluations to be grounded firmly on historical understanding, even with all its limitations. (He) never rested on safe assumptions, challenging his readers to think critically, and self-critically, about the complex and contradictory lessons of the past."

The Vatican itself may have been listening: A big breakthrough occurred last June, when Pope Francis authorized the online publication of 170 volumes from the Pius XII archives. But scholars cautioned against finding a smoking gun that would definitively prove the pope's guilt or innocence.

Michael Robert Marrus was born in Toronto on Feb. 3, 1941. His father, Elliott, was a lawyer, while his mother, Lillian (née Brenzel) was head designer at her father's dress manufacturing company. Eager to enlist in the war effort, Elliott Marrus signed up for officer's training at Camp Borden near Barrie, Ont. and then served in the Judge Advocate General's office in London, England for the duration of the war.

Young Michael initially intended to follow in his father's footsteps but a boring summer job at his father's law firm disabused him of that notion. Instead, he dove into the academic life, earning a BA from UofT and master's and doctorate degrees from the University of California, Berkeley. His PhD thesis was on French Jewish assimilation during the Dreyfus Affair in the mid-1890s.

He wasn't quite done with the credentials or love of the legal world: At age 64, he earned an MA in law at UofT.

At his first meeting with historian Doris Bergen, the second and current holder of the Wolfe chair in Holocaust Studies at UofT, Marrus had some advice.

"He said the most crucial thing I needed to know was, in his

words, 'you are not a piece of furniture.' I wasn't sure what he was referring to until he explained: 'You *hold* the chair, but you are not the chair; you are the Wolfe Professor,'" Bergen eulogized at Marrus's funeral on Dec. 27.

Bergen recalled that at an event once, a graduate student asked Marrus what he considered the most pressing issues in Holocaust studies that scholars should address in the future. He answered, "That's for you to decide."

Marrus believed that "each generation approaches the Holocaust through its own eyes, with its own issues and priorities, and this is how creativity happens," Bergen said.

Marrus himself was reluctant to offer a hard and fast answer to what the lessons of the Holocaust are.

"The deeper I get into this, the more problematic I see the issue of 'lessons,'" he said in an interview in 2016 following the publication of *Lessons of the Holocaust*. "I don't mean by this that one learns nothing from the Holocaust—to the contrary, I've spent my whole career at it—but I think it's impossible to distill a universally acknowledged set of lessons that people everywhere should accept, although many have tried."

As for the overall subject, "I've never been able to leave it," he added.

Some of his work is stored in the archives of Yad Vashem in Israel.

Amid a slew of awards, Marrus received the Order of Canada in 2008, in part, for advancing "scholarship on the history, causes and consequences of the Holocaust."

He also wrote books that were not about the Holocaust, including a biography of liquor magnate Samuel Bronfman, and *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War*, published in 1987 "at a time when very few historians were talking about these issues. It remains a key work in the area," Bergen stated.

An uncharacteristically ignoble fate awaited him in September 2017, when Marrus uttered a remark at a luncheon at UofT's Massey College that was intended as light-hearted but which offended a Black student. Marrus apologized and, after a public outcry, resigned as a Senior Fellow of the college. He conceded that the comment was "a poor effort at jocular humour" and that he harboured "no ill-intent whatsoever."

The *Globe and Mail* noted in an editorial that Marrus had been treated unfairly, "which is as unacceptable as the remark he made."

In all, it was an episode that seemed more a sign of the times than a reflection of Marrus's accomplishments and outsized personality.

"He appreciated originality above labels, sartorial style, an interesting home, a buzzy restaurant, a comfortable chair, international travels, a good book, a strong martini, an amusing conversation, and above all, he cherished his love and anchor, (his wife) Randi," noted his family.

He is survived by his wife of 51 years, Randi (Greenstein); children Jeremy and Adam Marrus and Naomi Kriss; three grandsons; and sisters Lesley Barsky and Judy Slan. ■

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