

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION****HENRY ALBERT FISCHEL****(November 11, 1913—March 18, 2008)**

Professor Henry Fischel began life as Heinz Albert Fischel, born to Anna and Adolf in Bonn, Germany in 1913. His father, who was a front soldier in World War I, came from a large family, and the Fischel brothers were known as leaders in the shoe business; they owned and operated a chain of shoe stores throughout the Rhineland. Adolf ran the store in Bonn, and Anna worked in the business as well. Heinz had one sister, Lotte.

In recalling his childhood in Bonn, Henry remembered the beauty of his hometown, and the particular influence of three local institutions on his character and aspirations: a celebrated university, the childhood home of Ludwig van Beethoven, and its only synagogue on the banks of the Rhine. In addition, Henry had a wide range of interests: playing chess, soccer, tennis, and also pursuing boxing. His father was prominent in the boxing world, and twice Henry competed in international bouts as a youth fly weight. Born in Bonn, birthplace of Beethoven, of which he was very proud, he could not but be a pianist. It seems that a baby-grand piano was a permanent fixture at home for decades. When he got to Meadowood, he held numerous recitals accompanied by commentaries, quizzes and esoteric remarks reminiscent of Carl Haas to delight and entertain his audience. Though he did not admit it, but as all who knew him learned, he was a closet borscht-belt comedian. His ability to tell jokes, his timing and phrasing were impeccable. Yet he was too gentle and could not bring himself to be as vulgar as most of them were.

In 1933, the same year Hitler rose to power, Henry graduated high school with distinction and spent a year studying at the University of Bonn. By then his classroom was sometimes packed with brownshirts and blackshirts, young people who adulated Hitler, but still thought nothing of applauding their Jewish lecturers. Despite later developments, Henry would always be appreciative of the best in German culture. For him, the brutality of the brownshirts could never destroy the beauty of Beethoven. His Germanness, like his Jewishness, like his teaching, and scholarship, and love and friendship, was rooted in a deep reverence and embrace of humanness.

He studied philosophy, law, and Roman law, and came to recognize his interest in religious studies. Working with a tutor, he managed to master two years of preparatory material in Jewish

studies on his own, an accomplishment that would allow him to pursue a program of rabbinical studies in five years rather than the typical seven. Henry moved to Berlin, and began studying at the *Hochschule für Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the premier institution for the advanced, academic study of Judaism. The Hochschule required its students to pursue university studies concurrent with rabbinical school, so Henry registered at the University of Berlin as well.

It was here that Henry initiated a lifelong friendship with Emil Fackenheim, one of the premiere philosophers of Judaism of the twentieth century. With their classmates, they studied with scholars who established Jewish studies as an academic field, giants such as Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttman, Hanoch Albeck, Leo Baeck. The magisterial works of such thinkers form the syllabus for liberal rabbinical studies until today.

By 1937, Jewish professors and students had been expelled from universities throughout Germany. For a time, the Hochschule became a full-fledged university, absorbing leading Jewish scholars from a wide breadth of fields who had been pushed out of their posts. For the two friends Fischel and Fackenheim, this was a heady time of exciting intellectual work in philosophy and literature. They at first regretted that when the Hochschule had an opening for a scholar of Judaism, they hired the philologist Moshe Sistar, a Jew from Poland, instead of another, younger scholar, an original thinker with Hasidic roots named Abraham Joshua Heschel. It was in 1937 that the Nazis rounded up the Polish Jews, sending them on a slow train to the east. When news that Professor Sistar had been sent away reached Fischel and Fackenheim, they rushed to his apartment, and packed a bag for him with fresh clothes. They rode a regular train along the same route, following the slow train through all the stations, until they reached the train full of Jewish prisoners, where they were able to find their teacher and pass the bag of his belongings through an open window into his appreciative arms. Professor Sistar was able to arrange passage to Israel, and became a prominent teacher in the Kibbutz movement; in Henry's words, a Marxist, but a lovable Marxist.

Then came *Kristallnacht*. Rumors circulated that the Gestapo was rounding up Jewish men, and would send 50,000 to a concentration camp. In 1938, Henry Fischel was the president of a small student organization at the Hochschule, a free loan society for the students. The Gestapo had regularly attended their small meetings, so Henry knew that he was known to the authorities. He got word from his landlady that the Nazis had come for him. He had time to escape. He considered it, but wondered what his disappearance would mean for his fellow students and the teachers at the Hochschule. His escape might put others at risk. Henry chose to risk his own life so as to save his fellow Jews. He went

to turn himself in and was transported, together with Fackenheim, to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, north of Berlin.

Henry recalled the privation of life at Sachsenhausen. He also recalled the consolation of being there together with his friend Fackenheim and all the interesting prisoners they met, among them Christians who had opposed the Nazis and had been in the camp for years. The International Student Service intervened, securing scholarships for Fischel and Fackenheim so that they could continue their studies abroad. Fearing an international incident, the Nazis agreed to release them in January 1939. Fischel was to matriculate at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, but his term would not begin until the fall, so he returned to the Hochschule to continue his studies. For weeks, he had to make daily appearances at Gestapo headquarters. Before leaving Germany, Henry completed his rabbinical training and was ordained.

Conditions for German citizens in Scotland were not promising, so instead of proceeding with his plan to study in Edinburgh, he, Fackenheim and other young rabbis were sent to Canada, where he lived in a holding camp for two years. Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple interceded so Henry and his cohort were allowed to leave the camp and be placed in Jewish communities throughout Canada to serve as teachers and leaders. Rabbi Fischel was assigned to St. Catherine's, where he met and married the love of his life, Sylvia.

In 1945, Henry finished his Ph.D. When an opportunity to teach at the University of Alabama arose, he rejoiced at the opportunity to teach and direct the local Hillel. It was in Tuscaloosa that he befriended the Lipson family, and officiated at the baby naming of Carolyn Lipson Walker, Assistant Director of the Borns Jewish Studies Program at IU Bloomington. From Alabama, the Fischels moved to Pittsburgh, where Henry directed a regional office for the Hillel foundation. Then, in 1958, he accepted an academic appointment at Brandeis, and in 1961 the Fischels came to Bloomington, where Henry initiated a long and celebrated tenure at Indiana University as Professor in what later became the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and Adjunct Professor with the Jewish Studies Program.

For decades, Professor Fischel was *the* scholar of Judaism at Indiana University, introducing generations of students to the whole sweep of Jewish civilization, culture, law and lore (especially *midrash*). He was instrumental in establishing the department of Religious Studies as well as the Jewish Studies Program. The academic honors and distinctions he attained include a Guggenheim fellowship, an

honorary doctorate from the Hebrew Union College, and an advanced doctorate, beyond the Ph. D., from the University of Edinburgh upon the completion of his first book.

As a scholar, Professor Fischel made important discoveries in the study of early Christianity. At the heart of his research was his exploration of the affinities between Greek and Jewish literature and culture, as he did in his many studies that were often pioneering in their day. In his teaching, also, he made frequent references to Greco-Roman influences on Jewish life as a product of the collision of these two civilizations. Given Henry's own history of dislocation, and the all too frequent chapters of such Jewish suffering during the span of centuries, it remains a curiosity why trauma and destruction were never topics of his scholarly attention. Instead, he focused on those moments from Jewish experience where Jewish and surrounding cultures intersected in creative and constructive ways.

If, as the saying goes, "man knows not the day of his death" can be a truism, Henry came close. Typically, he expressed this view matter-of-factly, without emotion or breaking down. He was always a sober realist who came to terms with any adversity, including his imminent death. During his last stay at Bloomington Hospital he was asked whether he was returning to the Meadowood Health Pavilion to recuperate from his diminished health and vigor, he said, "No, I want to die in my own home."

The only times he ever lost his composure were when, years ago, he called to announce the death of his beloved wife, Sylvia, and in his last days when he was asked how his childhood was, which he summed up as "Wonderful." Even days before his death, Henry was at his best. He was humorous, joking, inquisitive and anecdotal. Following our last visit we parted company with the promise to meet again soon to continue our discussion about names, culture and human nature.

It was reason that always guided him. When Sylvia fell ill, he decided that it was best to sell their home on Clifton Avenue and move to Meadowood so that she should have the best of care. When he began to lose his sight and learned that treatment would not reverse his condition, he acquired the necessary equipment to enable him to go on reading and writing, which he used to his last day.

Henry had long prepared for his death, mostly to make it easier on the living. He gave away his worldly belongings, bequeathed his beloved and vast Judaica library to Beth Shalom and kept revising his last will until all "t"s were crossed and "i"s dotted. Aware of his failing health Henry, ever the practical man, set his affairs in order. He summoned some friends to his side for prayer and conversation, and connected with others through the phone.

Yet he did not go gently into that good night. Henry's Hebrew name, *Hayim*--from HaRav Hayim ben Avraham Halevi--means Life. As he often liked to observe about others, "*kishmo ken hu*"--his name befits him as he befits his name—which may also be said about Henry, "*kishmo ken hu.*" He exemplified a stubborn drive to go on living no matter what.

Henry's chief weapon against adversity was his most powerful tool, his mind. He was a man of consummate reason, logic and good sense. Although aware of myths, beliefs and folkways, he had little use for them. Henry embodied the by now famous words of his friend, Emil Fackenheim, about not allowing Hitler to have a posthumous victory. His experiences in Nazi Germany did not faze him, nor did they traumatize him to contemplate the unthinkable. His ordeals, and the loss of many of his family members during the Holocaust, remained with him but he was a private man, seldom sharing such experiences with others. It only hurt him to see that humanity had learned little from those years and that mindless hatred of others persisted unabated, albeit concealed behind a thin veneer of pseudo-scholarship.

Henry was the consummate teacher, continuing the legacies he learned from his teachers and impressing many students with the breadth and scope of his knowledge and hunger to master overarching principles that unite civilizations. He loved teaching and admired his students, about whom he spoke highly and proudly. He treated them as equals. By example, he modeled the ideal of interpersonal respect and sensitivity. He never prejudged anyone. His regard for any person was always kind, generous and respectful, with no distinction between students, colleagues, deans or university presidents. He would always see the good in the other, and readily commend them for it. In fact, he readily made any of his conversation partners into his students, always teaching and sharing. In 1993, one of his students paid him tribute in a letter to the Indiana University Alumni magazine. Dr. Barry Ivker wrote:

"Dr. Fischel is a world renowned scholar, a scholar's scholar, whose seminars were frequently attended by professors and chair persons in associated fields. He was capable of tracking a metaphor through the poetry of the entire Mediterranean basin or a grammatical irregularity through a dozen or more archaic languages. Although now retired, he is still abreast of the current research in his field.

"I was impressed, in the 1960's and upon a recent visit, with his humility, his thoroughness, his critical mastery of the field, his quiet wit, his devotion to his family, his basic humanity. He exerted a

profound influence on me at a key moment in my life, and his stature as a scholar and as a teacher's teacher did much in establishing the respect that was achieved by the Jewish Studies department."

Henry's scholarly regard for his discipline also crossed into his non-academic pursuits as he made a study of all aspects in his life. Among those who knew him he was notorious about the assortment of vitamins, herbs and health additives he took. In one case, when the Jewish Studies Program had its first series of statewide interactive video lectures, Henry's turn came just as he was affected by a severe cold. Never mind-- he spent the day taking his favorite vitamins and appeared on the same night before the cameras healthy, clearheaded and with a strong voice to deliver his talk.

After retirement and finally surrendering his beloved driving privileges, he would ask friends to take him on shopping sprees to local supermarkets. Henry would carefully read each label, lecturing at length about mysterious ingredients such as palm oil, carrageenan and seemingly neutral fillers that he believed affected one's health. He was a careful shopper, a role he probably took on at the outset of his married life. Shopping trips with him demanded patience and a readiness to listen to these presentations on nutrition.

He was a night-owl, and anyone around the world could call him in the wee hours. So when we spoke over the phone -- before he got ill it was for at least an hour each time -- he would end our session with at least one good joke. And if I tried to do the same in my lame way, he would top my attempt. As a rationalist, he made a study of everything, from groceries to humor--he even once said that the most boring of conferences was the one dedicated to jokes. He had his jokes categorized, with variations on central themes. So when I would attempt one, he would top me by picking up on the theme of my joke and tell me one even better. Before beginning, or when in doubt, he always asked, "Did I tell you this one before?" And when I finally recalled the punch line just before he delivered it, he would say, "I am going to tell you this one 300 times until I remember that I told it to you."

Henry was also an arm-chair Hoosiers basketball fan. Though his height stood in the way of any aspirations to even feign being a basketball player (and I doubt if he ever picked up a ball) he loved and closely followed the Hoosiers, many of whom he knew by name. However, in his young days he was an avid soccer player. He followed the European games, but could not learn the rules of the American Soccer League.

Professor Fischel's loss marks the end of a long chain of German Jewish scholars of Judaism and the human experience. From the outset Henry devoted himself to the study of civilizations. His work on

the contact between Hellenism and Judaism in antiquity argues against the notion of the purity of a culture, or a race. People always borrow, he said, and adapt from each other as they form and reshape their way of doing things. This was his way of responding to the notions of cultural and racial purity and superiority of which his generation became a particular victim. His groundbreaking studies of cultures in contact put him at the crest of a rising wave of new scholarship that assured his immortality in the pantheon of the greats. His studies continue to be cited by students and scholars to this day.

Henry was that rare person that one at times has the good fortune of encountering in life. The encounter alters your whole life and being at your most basic self. It's as if he was placed where he was so that he could facilitate the growth of many who met him. Our sages often compared one's teacher to one's parent. In that sense, we all mourn the loss of a beloved father and are diminished by his absence. He is survived by daughters Antoinette (Toni) Jourard and Miriam Herman and by his nephew Robert (Bob) Newhouser.

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