



Kurt Jonassohn
1920-2011

Kurt's family sadly announces his death, peacefully on Thursday, December 1, 2011. Kurt was a devoted father and father-in-law to Frieda and Joe Faerstein, and Jody. Loving grandfather to Sarah and Michelle Faerstein, and Jake and Jesse Jonassohn. Generations of students whom he taught at Concordia University from 1961 to 1996 will remember with fondness and great respect their professor whose mission was to teach them how to think clearly, logically, and honestly about the social world.

Born in Cologne, Germany on August 31, 1920, Kurt was predeceased by his parents Frieda and Richard who perished in the Holocaust. Just before the war his brother Shlomo (who predeceased him) passed the necessary exams to immigrate to Palestine. Kurt failed the exams because of poor eyesight, but his strenuous efforts to leave Germany met success when the owner of a clothing company where he apprenticed opened a company in England. After England declared war on Germany Kurt was interned, and then again in Canada from 1942-43, the British and Canadian governments failing to make a distinction between enemy combatants and those persecuted by the Nazis. But "nothing could be very painful after Germany," Kurt wrote forty years later: "on the contrary, I always considered myself one of the lucky ones."

Kurt was eventually released to work in a war industry in Montreal, and after the war returned to the clothing industry as a cutter. Once he started to take evening courses at Sir George Williams University the die was cast: studying "turned out to be more fun than cutting and that's how I got into academia." He graduated from SGWU in 1953, earned the MA at McGill University in 1955, and proceeded to the University of Chicago for doctoral studies.

From 1959-61 he worked as research sociologist at R.C.A.F. HQ in Ottawa, before joining the Department of Sociology at SGWU where he became Full Professor in 1972. He retired in 1989 but his love for teaching prompted him to continue part-time until 1996.

Kurt was a born researcher: his intellectual curiosity, his scorn for untested home truths, and his love of the scholarly life drove his academic career. With David Kirk he published sociological studies of adoption; he published in the area of research methods; and he co-edited and contributed many articles to the International Sociological Association Bulletin, an organization that he served for nearly twenty years. Through the ISA and other networks Kurt worked to further the careers of younger scholars.

Kurt's enduring scholarly legacy rests on his contribution to the development of a new field--the Sociology of Genocide--and dates from the moment when his biographical history dramatically intersected with his sociological calling. This happened during a pilgrimage to Auschwitz in 1969. For the rest of his life Kurt thought, researched, taught, and wrote about genocide.

It is the supreme measure of the man that his vision of the problem began but was not constrained by the Holocaust which had claimed both his parents, his relatives and friends, and forced him to become a refugee. As he put it shortly before his death: "if there has been one aim in my work it has been to find the key to the prevention of future genocides. Although I have thought several times that I was getting close, on further reading and thinking, I was always disappointed. It was not only that my ideas changed but also that they were falsified by events." Kurt presented and published more than 40 papers and articles on genocide in addition to co-authoring two books and many articles. He published his last book review in 2008, an assessment of The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age.

In 1978, with his colleague Frank Chalk, Kurt developed a course—"The History and Sociology of Genocide from Ancient Times to the Present"—which they team-taught until Kurt's retirement. Together they presented numerous papers, wrote articles and published The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies (1990) which remains in print. In 1986 Kurt and Frank co-founded the Montreal Institute for Genocide Studies which they co-directed until Kurt's retirement. With Mervin Butovsky, Kurt collected the memoirs of 48 Holocaust Survivors and this project may be viewed at: <http://migs.concordia.ca/HolocaustMemoirAbstracts.htm>. Kurt was also a co-founder of the International Association of Genocide Scholars.

For many years Kurt lived on the 23rd floor of a small condominium overlooking Montreal, the city that he loved. From there he continued meeting every Saturday morning for breakfast with his best friend, the sociologist Hubert Guindon. Their loyalty to each other staggered their friends who knew that they did not share the same views on many things—most notably nationalism—but if they argued no one ever knew. Hubert's death in 2002 came as a blow to Kurt.

Kurt always said what he thought, and he could be short—and was—with those around him; certainly he always challenged ideas and practices that did not meet his standards. Those who knew him well realized that the crustiness served as cover for a man who had suffered and survived a great deal, yet maintained a generous heart, and loved deeply. How dearly he was loved is revealed in his granddaughter Sarah's high school leaving project which she chose to do on the life of her grandfather. Kurt put his impressive intellectual capacities to work for a more humane world, and he will be greatly missed.

Over the years, in gratitude for help to him and those he loved, Kurt made donations to several hospitals including the Mount Sinai, Montreal General, the Royal Victoria, Montreal Children's, Maimondes, and the Shaare Zedek Hospital Fund, and especially to the Jewish General Hospital in recognition of his years as a patient at the Hertzl Family Medicine Clinic. Kurt's generosity also extended to community organizations especially Sun Youth, the Welcome Hall Mission, and the Old Brewery Mission.

Kurt asked that any donations in his name be directed to the "Jonassohn Family Foundation" c/o the Jewish General Hospital Foundation, 514 340-8251 or to the "Jonassohn Genocide Collection" which he established in 2002 at Concordia University in memory of his parents, 514 848-2424 ext 3884.