

Obituary - Dr. Walter Zander

Sir James Craig, The Independent, London, April 18, 1993

The problem in writing about Walter Zander is that readers who did not know him will not believe the words one is obliged to use. How to persuade them that this is not the ritual eulogy of the newly dead?

His life began with distinguished but conventional success: then turned in its middle years into horror and catastrophe. He could have been, he should have been, bitter, angry, desperate, cynical. Instead, he was tolerant, gentle, courteous, generous, civilized, honorable—beyond belief honorable.

Born a Jew in Germany, he fought in the Great War on both fronts and won the Iron Cross. Afterwards he established a lawyer's practice in Berlin. When the Nazis arrived his Iron Cross offered no protection and he moved to England with his wife and young family (his mother died in the Holocaust). His career destroyed at the age of 40, this scholarly, unworldly man became an entrepreneur: with astonishing versatility he set up a printing business in Slough and a family home in Gerrards Cross. How bizarre those names ring out against his Central European background.

But very soon the Second World War destroyed his business and sent him off to internment in the Isle of Man. One of his comic memories was of the village bobby coming to arrest him and being hustled by the indignant villagers, indignant on behalf of an enemy alien with a music-hall German accent. Deprived of their livelihood for a

second time, his family were supported with food and comfort by those same suburban English villagers.

The troubles passed. In 1944 he was appointed secretary of the British Friends of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This was his profession for the next 27 years and he was a wholehearted Zionist. Whole-hearted but magnanimous: one of his principal concerns was the attitude of Zionism to the Arabs who lived in the land where the new state of Israel was to be established. His pamphlet *Is This the Way?* (1948) influenced intellectuals all over the world (Gandhi among them) but failed to move the politicians or the public. The Israelis respected him but could not take his advice. The Arabs, convinced of Zionist injustice, were hardly aware of his efforts.

One man on the Arab side, the Oxford don Albert Hourani, saw his worth and became his close friend. Under Hourani's sponsorship he became a member of St. Anthony's College, Oxford, and active in the Middle East Centre, where he was loved and respected by both sides in the grim Arab-Israel debate. In Oxford and in London, in Israel and in the United States, there grew around him, without effort on his part, a vast range of friends and disciples.

The death of his wife Gretl 25 years ago hit him hard, but he saw their four children into careers of enviable talent and distinction, united by family love and a devotion to music which was central to their lives.

The blindness and infirmity of old age did not diminish his dignity, his grace or his goodness. On his 90th birthday Isaiah Berlin wrote that he was "probably the purest-hearted man I have ever met." He died calm, confident of his religious faith and preternaturally polite. As we put him in his grave last week we were lovingly but uncomfortably aware that he had set us unattainable standards.