

In Memoriam

Richard Koch - (1902 - 1991)

by *Helen May*

I originally wrote this piece as a profile, hoping to celebrate Richard's entry into his tenth decade. He would have been ninety on 18 May 1992. Now, sadly, I am writing his obituary . . . he died on 1 December 1991, peacefully, in his sleep. He fought to the end to live an independent life, and when he could no longer do so he gave up the fight.

Over the last thirteen years, from the time that his wife Natalie died, Richard came regularly to lunch with Ron and me on *Shabbat* and also spent Friday night with the Faust family.

I learnt something of his family background from Richard himself. He was born in Vienna, one of nine brothers and sisters, of whom one sister was his twin. He came from a traditionally orthodox family. His father was a *yeshiva bocher*, while his mother kept the family shop as well as looking after her large family. Richard retained many fond memories of her, including her making of a large *cholent* for *Shabbat* lunch and then taking it to the baker for him to cook in his oven. He qualified as a lawyer, but in 1938, on *Kristallnacht*, he was arrested along with one of his brothers and a brother-in-law and taken to Dachau. He managed to obtain the release of them all, and somehow succeeded in getting exit visas for them, moving, in 1939, to Shanghai, the only place that would accept them. He did not like talking much about either of these experiences other than saying that the living conditions were appalling and there was near-starvation, but Richard's survival instincts were strong and he undertook all kinds of work to keep body and soul together. In 1948, after nine years in Shanghai, Richard managed to obtain a manual labourer's permit which enabled him to come to England, though he hoped he might settle in the United States or in Palestine.

Richard chose to come to Oxford because his twin sister and another one, Ida, were already there. Ida got him a job as a baker for Paines in South Parade. The fact that he knew nothing about baking bread was immaterial. It was there that he met Natalie, the manageress of the shop. Although

Richard's career as a baker did not last long it was long enough for him to woo her with cups of tea . . . what else in a bakery? They were married in 1949, and Harriet, their only child, who was born in 1949, gave them both great joy and pleasure. Harriet herself was married a few months before Natalie died in 1978. She and her husband Arnold have four delightful children who gave Richard great joy. He always spoke lovingly of the things they were doing at school, their participation in synagogue activities, and all the other things that children are involved in and that kept Harriet busy ferrying them to and fro.

After his stint at the bakery Richard turned to other occupations. His manual labourer's permit expired in 1953, by which time he felt his family responsibilities would not permit him to retrain as a lawyer in England. Instead he undertook various business ventures including furniture removals, newspaper salvage, running a garage, decorating, and a travel agency. It was Natalie who rekindled his interest in Jewish affairs and in the Oxford community. Their home was always 'open house' for students, visitors, and newcomers; and scarcely a Friday night, *Shabbat*, or festival went by without someone being offered their warm hospitality.

Richard immersed himself in every aspect of our community life. He was always there to make up a *minyan*-whatever the weather; and even towards the end-however ill he felt. He visited the sick in hospital and at home. He undertook prison visiting, ensuring that any Jewish inmate received whatever he needed to celebrate a particular festival. He conducted funerals with sincerity and dignity, he comforted the bereaved. He also supervised the *kashrut* of our meat supplies. He led our JIA campaign for some years and was a founder member of *B'nai B'rith* in Oxford. For many years he was warden of the synagogue, attending lovingly and meticulously to every detail great or small, of each service. He attended *shul* regularly right up to the end. How he could exasperate us, interrupting, correcting, intoning 'Amen' or the final verse of *kaddish* long after everyone else had finished! How frequently did we listen to his recital of mourner's *kaddish*, whether on behalf of a member of his own family or, if questioned, patiently explaining it was in memory of all who had perished in the Holocaust or on behalf of someone in the community who was unable to recite it himself. At *Shabbat* lunch time he would often grumble that the *Torah* and/or the prayers that morning had been taken at too fast a pace. He could not understand why it should be like that. What he couldn't accept was that he had become slower than the rest of us! He was for many years a member of the synagogue council, and in recognition of his

outstanding services he was elected an honorary life-member of the Congregation. He joined the Council of Christians and Jews, and in the Friendship Club was naturally an active and vocal participant, always striving to jolly up the proceedings.

If Richard hated the loneliness of life without Natalie he loved the company of all people, young and old. He was to be found at every meeting he could get to, always asking questions, joining in conversation, making his presence felt. At *Shabbat* lunch with us, if there was a lull in conversation he would make some outrageous comment with the deliberate aim of working up a lengthy argument. When I used to prod him with, 'Eat up, the meal is getting cold,' he would reply it was the company, the conversation, that was important, not the food! (I understood his priorities and knew he did not mean to be unkind.) He was always considerate of others, asking after my children and my parents. He particularly liked it when they were around for *Shabbat* lunch for he came to regard them as part of his extended family. He was kind and generous to others, particularly to WIZO and the community. The '*Kehilla*' was his life.

I shall miss waiting for him to arrive for lunch on *Shabbat*. Out of the car that brought him back from *shul*, plodding slowly up our driveway (and, latterly, puffingly), greeting me with a wet kiss and a '*Shabbat Shalom*', not letting me help him off with his coat or jacket. For me, Ron, and the whole community his passing is the end of an era. He will be much missed.

Oration

Delivered during the burial service on the 4th December 1991

by **Penny Faust**

FOR many of us, Richard's death marks the end of an era -there can be few people in our community who, over the years, have been regarded with so much affection tinged with more than a little exasperation. (Even on an occasion like this one, he would have wanted me to be honest.)

Born one of nine children in Vienna at the beginning of the century - he trained and worked as a lawyer. But in 1938, on Kristallnacht, he was arrested with his brother and brother-in-law and taken to Dachau. Somehow he obtained release for them all and in 1939, they went with another member of the family to Shanghai, the only place open to them. It was a hard life in appalling conditions, one of them died there - and if

he did not already know how to survive then that was then he learned, and he honed that capacity to a fine art, surviving typhoid epidemics and near-starvation.

He came to Oxford to join his sister in 1948 and his first job here was in Paines, the bakery...the job held no real prospects, but it was there that he met Natalie, whom he married in 1949.

Two years later, when Natalie was 44, Harriet was born...Richard never ceased to regard that as a miracle, and their family was established. The job in the bakery did not last long but Richard was a man of many parts and undertook a number of business ventures from furniture removing to running a garage, from decorating to a travel agency. As their financial security grew, Natalie revived Richard's interest in Jewish matters and he became a committed member of the community.

Many of us remember, with gratitude, the warm hospitality of their home on a Friday evening – they kept open house for students, visitors and newcomers alike and to all they accorded friendship and support when it was needed. Richard immersed himself in every aspect of the community's life, from the mundane to the spiritual: he supervised the *Kashrut* of the meat supplies and led the JIA campaign for some years; he visited the sick at home and in hospital and was the community's prison visitor; he conducted funeral services, comforted the bereaved and for many years was joint warden of the Synagogue attending lovingly to every detail of the services.

In 1978 Natalie died and all Richard's talents for survival were put to the test again. He created an independent life for himself, taking an enormous pride in his ability to cope on his own and make new friendships.

Those are the facts, but what about the man?

His commitments to his family and the community, the *kehila*, have been absolute. Family came first – Natalie and Harriet were his pride and joy and in recent years Harriet's marriage to Arnold bringing him, as it did, four grandchildren, gave him enormous happiness. As Harriet's family grew so did his pleasure – he derived real satisfaction from watching her competence as a mother and from the individual talents of all of the children, Naomi, Joshua, Miriam and Sam. I think he felt, in a very real sense, that they were part of his gift to the future.

And he did not limit his grandparenthood to his own grandchildren. for example, my own family, who did not know either of their real grandfathers, regarded him very much as their own and he responded to that, allowing

them the familiarity that comes with love and giving them his interest without expecting anything in return. We owe him much.

As for the community which was the focus of his life in Oxford for so many years, he put the welfare of the *kehila* above his personal needs. How often have we seen him both at the *shul* and here at the cemetery making up the *minyan* whatever the weather or the current state of his health? How often did he stand up to put a viewpoint that was not always popular, or even necessarily right for that particular moment, but always had the welfare of the congregation at heart? How often did we hear him recite mourners *kaddish*, not for himself, he would explain, but for those who perished in the Holocaust and anyone in the congregation who could not do it for themselves?

He was, too, responsible for the acquisition of funds which have given the community its current financial stability. An early participant in inter-faith dialogue, he became an active member of the Council of Christians and Jews. Some years ago the congregation gave him honorary life-membership in recognition of all he had done and that was really appropriate for he was a true servant of the community.

We all have our memories of Richard, in *shul*, at meetings, arguing with anyone who would take him on. For me what stood out was his abiding loyalty, his unending kindness, his insatiable curiosity; his capacity for reaching out across the generations and outside the Jewish community to make friends and communicate with other people. He thrived in company. The last Friday evening he spent in Oxford, less than two weeks ago, he decided to join the students for dinner to hear Lord Goodman speak. He was not well and found even breathing difficult, but the student who sat next to him said that his mind was razor sharp and that he was full of conversation.

I do not think that I know anyone who was so fiercely independent and yet so devoted to family and community; anyone who could be so demanding of attention and yet be so selfless in the face of other people's needs. He was an extraordinary man and a true friend. His presence will be sorely missed.

The Gap

*A tribute to Richard by **Kathy Shock***

THROUGH the gap in our hedge over the brief seven years that we knew him, Richard Koch weekly, sometimes daily, made a short-cut to the main road. His death has created a gap in our lives too. There were so many other aspects of life he touched in his daily determination to keep going and to do things and never to be beaten by ill-health or the weather. No-one who watched such a dogged will and continuous fascination for the minutiae of daily life could fail to be moved or impressed by the fierce commitment he had to everything he did. He often stopped on his way through for tea, coffee or a snack lunch and filled every moment with enquiring comments, musing reminiscence, thoughts on the state of the world. Any visitor at the time would be kindly interrogated and every detail of their life would be retained vividly, and yet it never occurred to him to gossip about anyone. The moment that most forcibly summed up this attitude to life for me was one earlier this year: in painful exhaustion he almost fell onto my kitchen stool, having pushed himself too far that morning, and as he sat he caught sight of my folding trolley. "Tell me, how does that work?" - tiredness forgotten as he talked. Such a life force was an example to us all and one with so rich and kindly a spirit behind it is one that will continue to touch many generations to come.



*Richard Koch,
photographed by
Kathy Shock
two weeks
before his death*