

OBITUARY KEN ARKWRIGHT, OAM

Peter Winterton, AM

Ken Arkwright OAM died on 26 June 2022 in Perth, Western Australia, at the age of 93.¹ He was born in Breslau, then East Prussia, Germany, now Wrocław, Poland, on 16 April 1929. The *West Australian* newspaper published an obituary on 29 July 2022, entitled ‘Resilience forged by Holocaust horrors’. Whilst this was undoubtedly correct, it did not convey the vast contribution that Ken and his wife Judith made to Jewish life in Perth and in his native Germany. It is for this reason that I am writing this obituary in his memory.

Ken’s memoirs of his upbringing and survival of the Holocaust were published in both English² and German.³ I will not go over the details of this story, other than to clarify that Ken survived the war with his father, Rudolf, but this was not known to the Nazi authorities, as this would have resulted in their deaths. This, in itself, is an amazing feat, to be together as father and son, but not to let it be known to your captors. Ken’s mother, Elisa, survived in the cellars of her native Breslau in the company of the city’s rats, in hunger and destitution.

The fact that Ken’s memoirs are used in Holocaust studies in Germany is very important, as this demonstrates the character of this man, who was able not to forget, but forgive and turn a negative life experience into a positive learning experience for himself and humanity.

It has often been said that behind every remarkable man there must be a remarkable woman. This can be no better illustrated than in Ken’s life’s journey. He arrived in Western Australia after having escaped East Germany in 1949, having been sponsored to Perth by a distant cousin, Eric Shilbury, a scholar, and mathematician in his own right. It was fortuitous that in the early 1950s there were some prominent members of Perth’s small Jewish community who felt that it was time to establish a liberal Jewish Community and thus Temple David was born. They had the will and vision to establish a community that was more accessible to the community, where families could sit together

and better understand the service. It is important to note that even prior to the foundation of Temple David there was an early Liberal Jewish movement away from the Orthodox Synagogue in Brisbane St. Ronald Taft, Rudi Goldman, Ray Burns, Philip Masel, Kurt Gottschalk, amongst others, were already meeting in a small makeshift synagogue in Palmerston Street, in what is now Northbridge. Rabbi Sanger, from Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne, when in Perth, would officiate. From the upper storey, the magnificent voice of Ken Arkwright would bellow forth as the community's nascent cantor, whilst below, Dr Vertha played the organ, asking 'Vat's next?'

Judith Masel was the only child of Marian Mendelson and Philip Masel, who served with the second 28th Battalion in Tobruk and El-Alamein. Philip Masel, OBE was the advertising manager, and his brother Sam the CEO, of the family business. Philip's father, Esor who was born in Minsk, had four sons with his first wife Leah: Alec, Sam, Harry and Philip. Leah died at age forty-three and Esor re-married; his second wife Hannah, bore him two daughters, Eva and Vida. In 1932, Esor Masel had established the menswear shop, Worth's, that in time prospered and become a national menswear icon and provided opportunity for many members of the Masel family, over ensuing generations, to establish themselves in business. This included Ken and Judith. In 1999, Worth's closed, a victim of changing fashions in menswear and the times.

Judith's early schooling had been at the height of the war against the Japanese in the Pacific when it was feared Perth would be bombed by the Japanese. She had been sent at age six to St Gertrude's Convent school in New Norcia,⁴ and later to Loretto Catholic Convent in Claremont, where she had the good fortune to study music with Mother John, with whom she formed a lifelong friendship. She was the only Jewish boarder at the school, and not being Catholic she could not become a prefect, but as a parting gift the nuns presented her with a book entitled *The Perfect Orchestra*, which in many ways was prophetic for her future life. Like her gifted mother before her, Judith went to Melbourne to further her music education. In 1952, when Temple David was founded, Judith was 16 and Ken 22. Over the ensuing five years they courted and were married at Temple David in 1957. Thus, 'Team Arkwright' was born. Since arriving in Australia in 1949, Ken had applied himself with amazing diligence to self-educate himself as an accountant and, after

some time working at Rheem Australia, he joined Worth's Menswear in 1963 as chief financial officer. Judith and Ken had two sons Peter (1959) and Kevin (1962) who have continued in the family tradition of contributing at all levels of community.

Judith and Ken were not only both founding members of Temple David. They sang in the choir for over sixty years; Ken was both cantor and at times substitute rabbi at Temple David. Judith said recently, 'When I married Ken, I didn't know how to read Hebrew and through Ken I learnt.' Ken's contribution to business life in Western Australia was also outstanding and included numerous positions, including being president and councillor of the Retail Traders Association of WA, councillor of the WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry, member of the Retail Advisory Council to the Minister (WA Government), chairman of the Retail Skill Centre of Western Australia and representative in Tokyo of the government of Western Australia at the Asian Productivity Forum on Information Technology.

Ken, like his stature, was a towering figure in the community and with Judith by his side was able to contribute at all levels of community life. He was a self-educated man, whose knowledge on all matters Judaica became legendary. His weekly article 'Did you know' in the local Jewish newspaper *The Maccabean* informed at least two generations of Perth's Jewish community. Ken and Judith both gave regular talks on all matters relating to Judaism at Maurice Zeffert Home, Perth's Jewish home for the aged. Ken gave numerous lectures on the Holocaust. For sixty years, they were regular attendees and contributors at Holocaust remembrance days and were involved in many of the Kristallnacht commemorations. He published numerous articles both in Australia and overseas in both his native German and in English. His article tracing his forefathers and their intimate connection to the Monash family was published in this journal as 'The extended Monasch Family'.⁵ Ken gave countless talks to school children of all denominations in many schools on the Holocaust, including Carmel School, government and private schools. He was involved in the establishment of Courage to Care in Western Australia and the Holocaust Museum of Western Australia. Ken was a long-standing Vice-President of the Council for Jews and Christians, with Judith as secretary and provider of the all-important refreshments for the meetings. Judith visited countless patients in all of Perth's hospitals for over a quarter of a century on a weekly basis. She

stood firmly by Ken's side when he was president of Temple David for an unprecedented six-year term. At that time, the secretary of Temple David was Mrs Malor. There being no formal office at Temple David, necessitated that Mrs Malor store the documents for Temple David under her bed, thus allowing Ken's humour to shine through, when he could claim 'he had been under Mrs Malor's bed'. His humour and ability to play with words in both English and German added to his charm and his ability to mingle and mix well in all communities.

In 2005, Ken was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the Jewish Community and The Retailers Association of Australia of which he had been past president. There can be no doubt that this was well deserved and was formal recognition of what 'Team Arkwright' had achieved across the Perth Jewish community. His charm, wit, intelligence and wisdom will be sadly missed.

Endnotes

- 1 His original surname, Aufrichtig, was changed to Arkwright on arrival in Australia.
- 2 Kenneth Arkwright, *Beyond Survival: A Holocaust Memoir*, Melbourne, Hybrid Publishers, 2018.
- 3 Kenneth James Arkwright, *Jenseits Des Überlebens: Von Breslau nach Australien*, Berlin: Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas, 2011.
- 4 A Benedictine Monastery about 80km north of Perth.
- 5 Ken Arkwright, 'The extended Monasch Family', *AJHSJ*, vol. 22, pt 4 (2016), pp. 610–20.