

# Homage to George Weidenfeld

The French have a delightful saying "*Il s'impose*" referring to an individual who is a force of nature, a colorful and charismatic figure who thrusts himself into the life of his times, and makes an extraordinary impact on people and public affairs.

Such a man was George Weidenfeld who died aged 96 in London on January 20, 2016. His impact and his achievements were all the more remarkable as a secular Jew and proud Zionist in the traditional British society dominated by the Establishment.

Born in Vienna in 1919, he escaped the Nazi Anschluss of Austria and arrived in London, aged 19 in 1938. After working for a time with the BBC Overseas Service, George co-founded, with Nigel Nicholson, the publishing firm of Weidenfeld and Nicholson, now part of the Orion Publishing Group.

That firm published an outstanding array of books by authors ranging from Isaiah Berlin and James Watson to Henry Kissinger and the Pope. George was most proud of publishing in 1959 Nabokov's *Lolita*, a book that had been banned in Britain three years earlier. His only mistake was, an editor of a small journal, to refuse to publish the great essay by George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, that has now become a classic.

Though he was best known as a publisher George was a public figure engaged as a philanthropist and patron and sponsor of many activities. With a sharp mind which remained alert to the end, a delight in ideas and discussion, a concern for political and social issues, and boundless energy, he played a considerable role in public service. As a result he was made a life peer in 1976, and spoke frequently in debates in the House of Lords.

George was a gregarious person who seemed to know everyone in

Britain, the United States, and Germany. He not only had a passion for books but loved people, especially women, whom he married four times, spending the last part of his life with the charming Annabelle. From a personal point of view this writer, one of whose books was published by George, can attest to that warmth. Meeting George in his office and in his grandiose somewhat bizarre home in London was always a delightful and rewarding experience. George exuded charm, was endlessly helpful, a fascinating conversationalist, and a generous friend.

George was a courageous individual both physically and intellectually. He showed this in 1937 when as a member of a Jewish fraternity in Vienna he challenged an anti-Semitic Nazi student to a duel, in which neither was wounded. He showed his compassion when, after the World War II, he visited his opponent, who had lost a leg during the war, and helped him financially.

Even more striking was in 1986 his independent attitude, and indeed intellectual courage since he disagreed with friends, towards the then UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim who was accused of at least moral complicity in Nazi atrocities during the war. Waldheim had been a school classmate of George who remained friendly to him and thought he was being treated unfairly. Weidenfeld even published Waldheim's *Memoir :In the Eve of the Storm*.

In 2015 George began repaying what he called a debt to the Christian community. On arrival in 1938 in London, penniless and alone, he had been helped by the Quakers and Plymouth Brethren. Now, George organized a plan to save 20,000 Syrian Christians and bring them to safety from the cruelties in Syria. The first part was implemented in July 2015 by an airlift of Christians to Warsaw.

To the end George was a strong, devoted supporter of the State of Israel, though he disagreed with some of the policies of

Israeli political leaders. He had been for some months in 1949 a political adviser, the chef de cabinet, of Chaim Weizmann, the President of Israel. He had served on a number of the boards of Israeli educational institutions.

In his last visit to New York he gave a remarkable lecture, which I attended, on November 19, 2015 on Theodor Herzl. George said that Herzl, pragmatic and sensible, had permeated his personal, his political, and his professional life. He saw Herzl not simply as a prophet, but as a person who managed to make some of his prophecies come true, particularly by founding the World Zionist movement, and was, like George himself, an apostle to the gentiles.

George's last words, at least in New York were a strong warning of the most important current problem, the threat of Islamist fundamentalism. He called for action to be taken against the jihadism that was threatening the democratic world.

George was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. May he rest in peace.