

Camp memories of Herman Wouk

My mother, Shirley Friedberg Neustein, was a childhood friend of Herman Wouk, who attended the boys' division of a Zionist camp (Keeyuma-Carmelia) in the 1920s and '30s, picturesquely situated on Lake Champlain in Milton, Vermont. They kept up the friendship until my mother died in 2001.

(Wouk died on May 17.)

In May 1962, my mother put together a monumental camp reunion, bringing together the Zionist youths that had now become household names in literary, theatrical, political and business circles: Arthur Miller, Moss Hart, Michael Wager (Mendy Weisgal), Norman Lear, Paul Goodman, Bob Treuhart and Andrew Goodman (founder of Bergdorf Goodman), just to name a few.

Herman Wouk was immersed at the time in "Youngblood Hawke," secluding himself in the Virgin Islands so as to devote full concentration to his novel. Unable to appear at the reunion, Herman made a poignant audiotape recounting his camp memories. My mother brought scissors with her, and out of respect for Herman's sensitivity, she cut the cassette tape immediately after it was played. The room stood still as the former campers listened closely to Herman's reflections on his camp days: stories, commentaries and humor about life among an oasis of trees for a Jewish boy growing up in the Bronx.

Herman Wouk made every Jew feel comfortable in their skin. "Inside, Outside," "This Is My God," "The Will to Live On" made us so very proud to be Jews in a world with contentious beliefs. His winning of a Pulitzer for "The Caine Mutiny" showed us that one can achieve the highest tribute in literature but still stand tall as a Jew. He will be remembered for instilling pride in all of us, a gift that is larger than life and for which there are yet no sufficient words to properly convey one's gratitude.

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