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Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut was a human rights advocate



It is not unusual for lawyers, as we advance through our careers, to assemble a short list of our heroes in the legal field — outstanding individuals who have earned our admiration for their achievements in the law.

They may be judges, authors, outstanding advocates, or even politicians who have introduced landmark changes to legislation. Dozens of names, both historical and contemporary, readily spring to mind, but for me, my all-time top legal giant was never even a lawyer.

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, who died last week at age 99, was born in Germany and finished law school just as the Nazis came to power. When he successfully completed his bar exams, he was prevented from becoming a lawyer.

“By Nazi decree,” he wrote in the first of two autobiographies, “my law career was now ended; Jews would no longer be admitted to the internship necessary for admission to the Bar.”

He turned to religious studies in Germany and the United States, and following ordination as a rabbi, served as a chaplain with the United States Army on the front lines in World War II. On April 12, 1945, he was in Nordhausen, Germany, with the first group of American soldiers to liberate a concentration camp.

He later served as a rabbi in synagogues in the United States before coming to Toronto where he served as rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple for almost two decades.

In the housing field, the Plaut name will always be connected with the building at 2480 Eglinton Ave. W.

Plaut Manor was built by Micah Homes Non-Profit Housing Corp., and named in honour of Gunther and Elizabeth Plaut, his late wife, in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the field of human rights.

Since 1993, Plaut Manor has provided 97 units of non-profit housing to assist victims of domestic violence and other special needs households, and allow them to move into safe, stable and affordable homes.

In February, 2000, Law Society Treasurer (now Court of Appeal Judge) Robert Armstrong agreed with my suggestion to award Plaut an honorary Doctor of Laws degree in recognition of his contributions to legal literature, social justice, race relations, immigration law reform, and human rights. One of the highlights of my career as a lawyer was introducing Plaut at a call to the bar ceremony at Roy Thomson Hall and formally requesting the Law Society to award the honorary degree.

In reading his two autobiographies — *Unfinished Business* and *More Unfinished Business*, I was deeply impressed at the parade of famous personalities who made personal appearances throughout the Plaut life story — Dwight Eisenhower, Albert Einstein, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin and David Ben Gurion; Diefenbaker, Pearson, Trudeau, and Clark; Martin Luther King, Queen Elizabeth, Harry Belafonte, Chief Justice Bora Laskin, Bob Rae, Elie Wiesel; Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, Adlai Stevenson, Henry Kissinger and so many more.

Plaut’s 1,600-page comprehensive study of the five books of Moses — perhaps the first “law textbooks” — entitled *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, is a worldwide bestseller. It is studied and respected by biblical scholars and students, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Plaut was also the author of 23 other books.

His scholarship was matched with a fierce and deep commitment to social justice, which led him to challenge both his own community and the larger civic community to fight social injustice everywhere it exists in our society. At his funeral last Sunday, his son, Rabbi Jonathan Plaut, called his father an electrifying speaker, a transformational leader, and a galvanizing spirit.

An uncompromising opponent of racism in all its forms, Plaut was one of the founders of Toronto’s Urban Alliance on Race Relations, and served for seven years as vice-chair of the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

In 1984 Plaut was appointed by the government of Canada to revise Canada’s refugee legislation and many of his suggestions — including the recommendation for a new Immigration and Refugee Board — eventually became law.

Plaut’s passing leaves a huge void in the lives of thousands of his admirers. I will miss him.

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