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**Personal Memories - Prof. David Bankier, obm**

<http://yad-vashem.blogspot.com/2010/03/personal-memories-prof-david-bankier.html>

Since David Bankier (ז"ל) passed away last week, I've been trying to remember when we first met. I have clear memories of him giving me rides out of Yad Vashem in the early 1980s when we both gave lectures in what was then called the Education Department. I can't recall if this was as early as the summer of 1981 when I began there, or somewhat later. I do recall that David was well along in his doctoral work and I was just at the beginning. I also have a clear recollection of him finishing his PhD in 1983 and I retain a gnawing feeling that we may have met much earlier, perhaps when I began my MA in 1978 at the Institute for Contemporary Jewry. But I can't pin down that memory.

I got to know David better in the early 1990s when he asked me to teach with him in the School for Overseas Students at the Hebrew University. He gave a course that included a lecture and a more intimate, hands on class, looking at documents. He asked me to teach a weekly session of the documents class and we put together a sourcebook. Of course when David joined us at Yad Vashem as the Head of the Research Institute in 2000 our contact grew even more.

Everyone who knew David recalls that he was not only brilliant and had a great sense of humor, but he was always himself and never put on airs or acted pompously. I think it was arduous for him to wear a jacket and tie, when the situation required it. He was direct and especially when it came to intellectual honesty, was rigorous.

I greatly admired David's intellect. I recall at a Yad Vashem Conference, he once answered a question by citing the marginal comments he had seen on a document at the Public Records office in London. What made it remarkable, is that the document had nothing directly to do with his research, but was one he apparently saw while sifting through other material. I doubt he ever mentioned the document in his writing, but he recalled it completely. As a scholar, David was open to new ideas, but they had to be well-founded. He really had no patience for bad scholarship, and he sometimes made that clear in his comments and questions following a presentation at the Institute.

Although I learned a great deal from participating in numerous conferences, symposia and discussions with David, there remains one area in which we disagreed. David was a "documents" man. He liked traditional documentation and believed that testimonies and memoirs are not particularly good sources for historical inquiry. For my part, I think that

testimonies and memoirs are extremely important, albeit flawed sources, for many kinds of historical information. Even though we disagreed, he expressed both interest and support for my research, which rests to a large extent on firsthand accounts. I'm very sorry he will never read my forthcoming book on the Hungarian Jewish forced laborers on the Eastern Front, since among other things, the support he gave me through the Tauber Fund in the Institute facilitated the research.

David's contributions to the field of Holocaust scholarship are many. When his book *The Germans and the Final Solution* appeared in 1992, it became a must read for anyone who deals in the subject. Even today, 18 years later, it remains the best monograph on the subject.

I think one of the most important things David did at the Research Institute was take up the challenge of organizing and presenting basic information about the Holocaust. He was not necessarily the originator of the ideas, but he saw how important it is to have accurate and concise information about the ghettos, camps and killing sites. He understood the importance of pinning down the geography of the Holocaust. To his great credit, he not only understood this should be done, but he initiated and then accompanied the actual projects.

Another innovation in the Institute during his tenure is the ongoing exchange between our young scholars and young scholars from around the world. Getting the chance to hear young scholars from abroad is not only enlightening in terms of information, it is very important for us to understand what is being researched and how. It is equally valuable for providing a vehicle for exposing foreign scholars to all the things Yad Vashem has to offer. Lastly, the exchanges provide a very beneficial by product – personal relations between our people and many upcoming foreign scholars.

When David first became ill it was a bit awkward to express concern and interest without crowding him. I took to coming into his office fairly frequently and telling him a new joke, since I knew he was always a great audience for something funny. Lots of times he repaid me with a joke of his own. As the years went by and David's health remained poor, as we all know, he continued to work. Since for a certain period, I gave him rides home, during which we had non-work time to chat, I became more and more comfortable talking to him about his situation. He was candid, but he certainly did not like to dwell on his ill health.

Like everyone I know at Yad Vashem, I greatly admired the way he fought his illness. He fought it so valiantly that it seemed he might not succumb at all. The morning after he lost consciousness, somebody asked me how he was, since he was absent from the symposium that was being held that morning for Tuvia Friling's new book. Because I had

not yet heard about what had happened, I answered that he has his ups and downs, and I imagine he'll be back soon. Even when I heard later that day that he was in a coma, against all logic, I still felt deep down that he would come back. Of course that didn't happen. Even nearly a week after his passing, I have to suppress the desire to pop into his office and ask him how he's doing. I'm sure I'm not alone in intensely feeling his absence and I'm sure we will feel it along the corridors of Yad Vashem and in our hearts for some time to come. May his memory be blessed.