

Dr. Stephen Feinstein mourned locally and globally

By MORDECAI SPECKTOR

The local Jewish community has reacted with shock and profound sadness to the sudden death of Dr. Stephen Feinstein, director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (CHGS) at the University of Minnesota.

Feinstein was speaking on Tuesday evening, March 4, at the Hopkins Cinema, following the screening of a documentary film about Simon Wiesenthal, as part of the Sabes Foundation Jewish Film Festival. His words stopped when he was stricken by an aortic dissection. He was taken by ambulance to Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, where doctors were not able to save him. He was 64.

Beyond his internationally renowned scholarship in diverse aspects of the Holocaust, Feinstein is fondly remembered by friends and colleagues for his passionate activism on behalf of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry, and his efforts to stop genocide around the globe. Feinstein, who had a particular expertise in artistic representations of the Holocaust and other acts of genocide, also is being mourned by Rwandans, Armenians and others whose causes he championed.

On a Facebook page created by Luke Walker, a CHGS student worker, Alice Musabende, whose entire family was killed in the Rwandan genocide, recalled coming to speak in Minnesota recently and sitting next to

Feinstein at a dinner.

"I loved his company, his sense of humor, his knowledge of the Rwanda genocide and other genocide. Steve was one of those rare people in the United States and in the world who... understands what genocide really is," Musabende wrote.

Feinstein also linked the genocide of the Armenians early in the previous century to the tragedy that later befell European Jewry.

"Stephen Feinstein was a true friend of the Armenians and all peoples affected by genocide, a dear colleague and a scholar of great integrity," Lou Ann Matossian, director of cultural and external affairs of the Armenian Cultural Organization of Minnesota, noted this week. "The Armenian community of Minnesota was honored to embrace him as one of our own. His loss is heartbreaking and incalculable."

Nobel laureate and Shoah survivor Elie Wiesel told the Star Tribune last week that Feinstein "was involved in preserving the memory of those who perished in the Holocaust. All those who knew him will miss him."

Feinstein was a frequent contributor to the American Jewish World, and his commentary article urging



Dr. Stephen Feinstein inspired his students and colleagues to fight for a more humane world.

people to see the *Deadly Medicine* exhibit at the Minnesota Science Museum in St. Paul appeared in last week's edition. Feinstein was instrumental in bringing the exhibit on eugenics and Nazi medical experiments here from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Among the many moving eulogies at the funeral held last Friday at Beth

El Synagogue in St. Louis Park, that of Rabbi Alexander Davis recalled Feinstein as a "larger than life communal figure" who seamlessly blended his academic endeavors and social activism with family life.

"Whether it was editing his children's high school papers or fixing the plumbing, taking the kids to meet their refusenik B'nai Mitzva twins or traveling out West by car, Steve was as much a scholar and activist at home as he was outside the home," Davis said.

Revealing another side of the beloved historian and activist, Feinstein's son, Jeremy, in his eloquent eulogy last Friday, informed those in the packed sanctuary that his father "assembled one of the largest collections of Lionel toy trains in the Midwest. As a young boy, I sat next to him and helped him build out his train layout in the basement, which has continued to grow each year for the past 35 years. We painted the scenery together, wired the tracks and lights, and tested the engines that he purchased at various garage sales and train conventions — my dad was big on garage sales."

Although Feinstein was widely known as a Holocaust scholar, he also

was one of the leading activists on behalf of the movement to free Soviet Jewry during the Cold War.

Mort Ryweck, who headed the Jewish Community Relations Council/ADL of Minnesota and the Dakotas from 1975 to 1991, told the AJW this week that he first met Feinstein in connection with the issue of "helping free Soviet Jewry, to come to America or go elsewhere."

Ryweck said that Feinstein was a "beautiful combination of a scholar and social activist... and always on the frontlines, as well." He added that the local Soviet Jewry group became a commission of the JCRC/ADL. (The ADL later withdrew from its joint operation with the JCRC.)

Jeremy Feinstein recalled that there "were always Russian people around our house. Many were families whom my father had helped over the years to emigrate to Minnesota. Never mind the Swedish, blond hair stereotype: It was my reality that most people in Minnesota spoke Russian, had brown hair, were born in Moscow, and were Jewish. New émigrés were always coming over for dinner, shopping at garage sales with my dad for furniture, and playing doubles tennis with him."

In her eulogy at Beth El, Rebecca Winitzer noted that her father was struck by "the social injustices of anti-Semitism experienced by Russian Jewish refuseniks — those Jews who were refused

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exit from the former Soviet Union. He spent vast amounts of physical and emotional energy towards this cause, raising awareness in the Jewish community, secretly visiting refuseniks during his yearly trips to the former Soviet Union, and being involved in the March on Washington for Soviet Jews in 1987.”

Robert Aronson, a JCRC board member and Soviet Jewry activist, said that Feinstein was “probably the single most influential person in my own commitment to the Soviet Jewry movement and, more broadly, the cause of international human rights.”

“He was also a leader, locally and nationally, on the Ethiopian Jewry issue,” added Ryweck, about the movement that led to the mass aliya of the beleaguered Ethiopian Jewish community.

The JCRC honored Feinstein in 1987 as Volunteer of the Year for his dedication to Soviet Jewry and international human rights.

“Dr. Feinstein’s impact on this community will truly be missed,” said Steve Hunegs, JCRC executive director, who added, “The world has lost a unique and exceptional leader. Dr. Feinstein will be remembered as an inspiration, an internationally renowned scholar, and most of all, a true mensch. We hope that his memory will serve as a blessing and his life’s work as his unending legacy.”

Feinstein was a popular professor at the University of Minnesota; and many of his students, past and present, helped fill the pews at Beth El on Friday. Likewise, he was held in the highest regard by his academic colleagues, both for his scholarly work and for his irrepressible sense of humor.

Paul Levine, a senior lecturer in Holocaust history at Uppsala University in Sweden, recalled Feinstein as “a great colleague who represented the very best of academia, a tireless and inspirational leader in the field of Holocaust studies, and a real mensch.”

“He represented a wealth of knowledge... His humor and wit was immense!” commented Bjarte Bruland, chief curator of the Jewish Museum in Oslo, Norway, who met Feinstein during a forum on Norway’s role in the Holocaust held at the U of M last year. Of course, Feinstein was a principal organizer of the event. “I found a friend in him even during that short time, and that’s why his death was such a shock to me. He was talking about a trip to Norway, and I hoped to see him here and even collaborate with him again.”

“Feinstein fearlessly devoted himself to the spectrum of the evil, from the Holocaust to the decimation of the American Indian, to the Turkish genocide against Armenians, to the current systematic mass murders in

Darfur,” author Edwin Black wrote this week.

Black mentioned that he was invited to stay in Stephen and Susan Feinstein’s Minneapolis home when he came here to lecture. And adding to the recollections of Feinstein’s quirky sense of humor, Black explained that his friend and colleague relieved the pressure of studying immense human evil with jokes. “That made him so human in a field of inhumanity, and helped those around him know that his view held that progress required rising above it — and that meant breaking free from the paralysis of evil deeds. Once he and I shared a meal of Mongolian yak in a Minneapolis ethnic restaurant. He never let me forget it, making yak jokes at almost every turn.”

“He kept saying to me, ‘Don’t work so hard, you can’t end genocide by Tuesday,’” said Ellen Kennedy, outreach coordinator at the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. “He threatened to pipe Valium into the office to slow me down. At the same time, he worked at warp speed every day and his passion for this work was truly contagious.”

Kennedy told the Jewish World: “Steve had more friends than anyone else has in a lifetime, and he showed us what it really means to be a friend. Steve was a man of such compassion that I think he felt he had to change the world himself. And what he couldn’t do himself,

he would get other people to help him do, not only by asking them directly, but by bringing them into his sphere, into his world, and he would infect people with that vision and that determination to make a difference.”

Born in Philadelphia, the only child of Jack and Beatrice Feinstein, Steve was among the first generation of his family to attend college. He graduated from Villanova University in 1964, with a B.S. in economics. He earned a master’s degree in European history and art, then a doctorate in Russian and European history, at New York University.

Steve and his wife, Susan, also a Philadelphia native, moved to the Upper Midwest in 1969, when Steve got a teaching position at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. In 1997, he became the acting director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota; he was appointed director of the center in 1999.

The list of Feinstein’s notable lectures and published papers is too extensive to publish here. Locally, he was the curator of the exhibit *Absence/Presence: The Artistic Memory of the Holocaust and Genocide*, which was displayed at the U of M’s Nash Gallery in 1999. He also was the curator of *Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art About the Holocaust*, which was displayed at the Minnesota Museum

of American Art in 1995.

The catalog for the *Witness and Legacy* exhibit included essays by the featured artists. Painter Samuel Bak, a native of Lithuania, whose father and grandparents were all murdered by the Nazis in the Ponari forest outside of Vilnius, survived the war with his mother.

“I feel the necessity to remember and take it upon myself to bear witness to the things that happened in those times, so that human beings today and those of tomorrow, if it were only possible, are spared a similar destiny on earth,” Bak wrote.

A similar sentiment seemed to guide Stephen Feinstein throughout his life. He was a courageous, outspoken advocate for remembrance of historical evil and for suffering humanity in our day. A fearless critic of the established leadership in the Jewish community, and in the greater society, Steve was a moral touchstone for his students, colleagues and friends. Each of us will now have to work more diligently to help realize his dream of a humane world, one where genocide no longer exists.

For further details, please see the death notice for Stephen Feinstein on this page.

Of Blessed Memory

MINNEAPOLIS

Dr. Stephen Feinstein

age 64, of Minneapolis, director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota, died suddenly on March 4. Services were March 7 at Beth El Synagogue with Rabbi Alexander Davis and Cantor Audrey Abrams. Preceded in death by parents, Jack and Beatrice Feinstein. Survived by wife, Susan; son, Jeremy; daughter, Rebecca and Avi Winitzer; and grandchildren, Sarah and Shammai Winitzer. Memorials preferred to the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota Foundation, P.O. Box 70870, St. Paul, MN 55170-3854. Arr: Hodroff-Epstein.