

# Herman Wouk

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Herman Wouk who died a few weeks ago at the age of 103, was one of the most successful American novelists. Surprisingly, he was also a practicing, orthodox Jew. Unlike the current crop of American Jewish novelists (who just love to demean and diminish their Jewish heritage and distance themselves) Herman Wouk was proud of his Jewish religious identity and supportive of traditional Jewish values and an Orthodox life style.

During the Second World War he had a distinguished career in the Navy. His experiences there were the background to his first novel "Aurora Dawn" and then the roaring success, "The Caine Munity" written in 1951. It won the Pulitzer prize and was on the best-seller lists for over two years. It was turned into a very successful movie.

Then came another best-seller "Marjorie Morningstar" in 1955. Also turned into successful movie. It was the love story of a beautiful naïve New York Jewish girl called Marjorie Morgenstern from a wealthy, traditional family. She falls in love with an assimilated Jew who her parents disapprove of because he wants to be in the theater rather than a doctor or lawyer. After Marjorie graduates, she decides she wants to be an actress. Their relationship blossoms but then falters and collapses. In the end she finds love with a conventional man. Scenes from Jewish religious life introduced Judaism to the wider American public. It too became a very successful mover with Natalie Wood in the lead.

"Marjorie Morningstar" was the first overtly Jewish movie of the postwar era, that dealt openly with questions of Jewish identity in America. It established Wouk as the leading pro-Jewish writer in the English language. But soon he would be overshadowed by Chaim Potok (author of "The Chosen") who wrote about life in the Hassidic community and the tensions between modernity and tradition.

Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth were great writers and magisterial figures on the world literary scene. Much more acclaimed by the literati and critics. But they had all rejected their Jewish religious identity and were heroes of the radical left. Now of course they are unfashionable because they are white males and Jewish to boot. One can argue whether they contributed anything to Jewish life whatsoever. Not so Wouk.

His significance for me lay in a small book he wrote 'This is my God' in 1959. In it he explained Orthodox Judaism to the wider Jewish and non-Jewish world. In simple prose and without preaching, he describes beautifully what living as an orthodox Jew meant to him and how it contributed in a meaningful way to his life. He describes the richness of traditional ritual and practice in ways that make them accessible to those on the outside. Fifty years on it is still highly readable and relevant. It is still in print.

Time Magazine wrote a profile on him which said, "He is a devout Orthodox Jew who had achieved worldly success in worldly-wise Manhattan while adhering to dietary prohibitions and traditional rituals which many of his fellow Jews find embarrassing."

Throughout my career in the Rabbinate and Education I have always recommended 'This is my God'. And I still do, whether to Jew or non-Jew, as the easy first step along the way to leaning more about Judaism. His death has made me feel that I have lost a close friend even though I never met him. And by the way, to anyone who wants to go the next step after Wouk, I really recommend Martin Goodman's recently published 'A History of Judaism.'

The American world that Wouk grew up in was one was still heavily antisemitic. Preachers and politicians openly railed against the Jews and their supposedly hidden and venal influence on American life. The old Western European Jews who came to America in the early 1800s had made their fortunes were well on their way to complete assimilation. Many of the new Eastern European arrivals of the end of the century were strongly socialist. They were less inclined to be religiously committed. They were so intent on escaping poverty that they worked so hard, they had little time for religion and threw themselves totally into the dominant American society. Even so hard work and success could overcome a lot of prejudice as Wouk experienced in the Navy.

When Wouk wrote, Reform and Conservative Judaism were completely dominant in the USA. Orthodoxy was a very minor unimportant sliver of the Jewish population. There were still limits on Jews at Ivy League Universities, in the major professions and in government. Most Golf and private clubs excluded Jews too. Which explains why so many Americans feared drawing attention to themselves and tried to hide their Jewish identity. It also explains why so many were anti-Zionist too. That was why Wouk was in his day so remarkable

Now fifty years later much has changed. Orthodoxy has grown exponentially. It is the only sector of American Jewry that is expanding in size and influence. You can now see Orthodox men and women in all the major professions proudly

displaying their symbols of Jewish identity in public. Not to mention the large number of Hassidim in the ranks of commerce and industry (as well of course within their secure ghettos).

Sadly, the old Jew haters remain, Farrakhan, Duke. In Europe and Britain (assuming it leaves the EU) the threat comes from the Fascist Right, the Radical Left, who are now joined by the Labour Party. And new younger voices are gaining traction to replace the old sickos.

Whereas Jews are doing well and thriving through their own efforts, and most doors are open, the other side of the coin is all too obvious. Now on campuses many young Jews are scared to speak up against faculties and student bodies determined to attack and silence them. They often feel they need to hide their Jewish identity in the way they used to in Wouk's early days. And antipathy towards Jews is rising amongst many communities, to such a crescendo that leading Democrats are now too scared to condemn prejudice and lies for fear of losing votes.

Just as "the poor will never cease from the land," as the Torah says, so hatred of Jews wherever it comes from and whatever the cause will never cease. But proud spokesmen like Herman Wouk, who can reach a wider audience, not just preach to the converted, are worth their weight in gold. We have lost a great one. Let us hope that a new generation will emerge.