

## The Tribute

David was born in on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1926 in Haifa, then in Palestine, now in Israel. He was the son of Benjamin Ibry, a British citizen of Russian Jewish descent, one of the early secular Zionists working to establish a Jewish State, and his wife Giulietta, who could trace her Catholic aristocratic Italian ancestry back for centuries. When his parents divorced, David stayed with his father in Palestine. When David was 6, though, his father died and the young boy, speaking only Hebrew, joined his mother and sister in Milan, in the home of his strictly Catholic grandmother. This must have been a sad, difficult and confusing time for the small boy. Gradually, though, he became integrated into this very different way of life and he enjoyed long summers spent with his cousins Argietta, Carlo, Vipi and Pucci and their mothers, on the Venetian Lido. Vipi's son, Giorgio, who can't be with us today, remembers "My mother Vipi was bound by affection with him and we all too. He was a great and sensitive man".

During the years of Fascism under Mussolini, however, his education became disrupted as the "racial laws" were implemented. As the situation became more dangerous, Giulietta acquired false papers for the children, and the family moved to the mountains near the Swiss border. David was accepted first into a Jesuit school then a convent school. Here he was threatened with excommunication by the Mother Superior, after a girl to whom David had addressed a 'love letter' reported him!

Otherwise he spent many hours exploring the mountains which he loved. Later, during the Nazi occupation, he acted as a messenger for a group of Partisans. David never forgot the kindness and courage of the people in the mountain villages, who certainly guessed why the family was there but who never denounced them to the Nazis, despite the reward on offer.

After the liberation of Italy David was keen to go to University but had to work to contribute to the family upkeep.

At the age of 22, though, devoted to his father's memory, David sailed with one of the boatloads of volunteers entering Israel illegally to work and fight for the

nascent State of Israel. He lived on a kibbutz and enrolled in the army where, despite his extreme short-sightedness, he was given the job of sniper!

During this time he also met members of his father's family including an aunt who was a paediatrician and an MP in Israel's first Parliament.

After his stint in the army he stayed on until 1950 working on a fishing boat, which he enjoyed.

Returning to Italy, David worked for Olivetti and eventually was sent by the firm to open and manage their first branch in South Africa. He was accompanied by Isabella, his wife from a Protestant family in the mountainous Friuli region, whom he married in 1954. Their happiness was sealed with the birth of their beloved son who was named Benjamin after David's father. David was at last able to pursue his thirst for education and gained a Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Milan in 1963. He also earned his pilot's licence.

Tragically Isabella developed Multiple Sclerosis and David travelled far and wide seeking out the latest treatments for her. In 1964 tragedy struck again when Isabella and Benjamin died in a car crash, which David survived. There followed a very dark time in David's life.

To try to cope with his overwhelming grief he took up long distance running. He took part in many marathons and in 1970 and 1971 was proud of finishing the Comrade's Marathon, an "ultramarathon" of 56 miles between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. He was also a long distance swimmer. He continued his education, and in 1969 he was awarded an MA in Philosophy by the University of South Africa.

He never forgot the great kindness of the members of the Unitarian Church towards him at the time and kept in touch until the end of his life.

Returning to Italy and using his excellent English (learnt from Linguaphone) he worked as an export manager, embarking on a round-the-world sales trip; then he moved to work in the UK as a representative for Italian firms.

He married Rosalba, who he had met through his passion for running, and she followed him to England. They had 2 children, Helen born in 1978 and

Benjamin born in 1981 (and again named after David's father). Some time after Benjamin was born, however, they separated, and the children grew up in Italy with Rosalba.

Helen will now talk to us about her father.

### ABSENCE

*If I think of my father, David Ibry, the main emotions are: absence, quest, hardship.*

*We (my brother and me) call him Daddy. As a child living in Italy and speaking Italian, I thought for long time that this was a part of his first name. The Italian translation "papa" didn't fit: I couldn't recognize in him what other kids indicated as their "papa".*

*I remember a tall man, slim, with very thick glasses. I definitely received his dna, not only for the physical part, but also regarding some aspects of personality.*

*I've tried for so long to build a relationship with him but it was very difficult, even if we both wanted to. So now it sounds like the end of this long story of attempts, or maybe not. Who knows?*

*I've been putting together pieces of a long life story, a life that goes through nearly all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the history of Europe. David's life and his sister's one were at the core of key historical moments, wars, migrations, building of nations, building of cultures, languages and identities. So that the concept of identity was a fundamental one for him, not in an essentialist way but from a constructionist point of view.*

*Having gone through so many changes in life helped him understand that human beings need identities, they need the feeling of belonging to a community, and problems arise when others cannot identify you as part of a specific community because you are a potential traitor. Crossing boundaries is a burden, but a wonderful one for you get to see the world in multiple ways.*

*I'll remember the importance he gave to his roots and at the same time the claim for freedom from all constrictions. On one side fighting against the negative sides of religions, and on the other side looking for secular rites (jewish or humanist). On one side living the longest part of his life outside of Italy, and on the other side longing for Italy: going to Italian restaurants abroad looking for a decent Risotto, setting up an Italian Culture Group, teaching Italian.*

*I would have loved to have him more present in my life.*

*Anyway he'll always remain a part of me, even through his longstanding absence.*

*Be well wherever you are and Arrivederci.*

In 1984 David met Cynthia, who was working at the Home Office Probation Service Training Centre. She noted with concern that he seemed to be existing on raw eggs and took him in hand. Over 33 years they developed a loving, argumentative but mutually life-enhancing partnership. For Cynthia "David helped me to swim out of my depth", while Cynthia's Yorkshire common sense reined in some of David's wilder flights of fancy. "She kept my feet on the ground", he often said. She fully supported him in his creative endeavours and there followed for David a long period of achievement, fulfilment and the enjoyment of life. Together they travelled widely but always spent one holiday each year exploring the delights of Italy from top to toe, and on to its islands. They both recognised Humanism as the very positive philosophical approach to life they were seeking and after retirement trained with the BHA as Humanist funeral officiants; work which combined David's creativity and love of writing, literature and music with a desire to make a Humanist contribution to society. He found this work inspiring.

In 1999 he published "Exodus to Humanism - Identity without Religion", an anthology of contributions from 26 Jewish people, some eminent in their field, relating their journey from Judaism to Humanism. Several became good friends. An Italian edition was published in 2011.

At the age of 65, David ventured into teaching Italian at the local Adult Education Institute. He did this until he was 80 and was very successful, enjoying passing on his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Italian language and culture.

The advanced class in particular enjoyed the handouts he wrote on Italian history. The ones on philosophical themes evoked more mixed feelings – one student lamented that he only really wanted “to be able to order a cup of coffee”; another that he enjoyed the grammar but not “discussing the meaning of life”.

In 1979 David had started the Anglo-Italian Cultural Circle of North London, and over 37 years dozens of people were inspired by the program of talks on Italian culture, discussions on Italian literature and outings to places and cultural events connected with Italy.

Cynthia has received lots of messages from members of the Circle. David Steiner said "We will all miss David in the Circolo Italiano. He was a good and upright person who always had a good word to say about whatever subject was at hand. No spite or aggression and always a positive view. The world has few enough people of this calibre." Louisella, another member, called him “An extraordinary man, who when he is gone, cannot be replaced”. And Dr Paolo Detassis said “I have lost one of my best friends, a mentor, a person who I loved and admired”.

After he stopped teaching at the Institute, he continued to give private lessons. One of his students at that time, Dr. Margaret Safranek, said: "He was such a lovely man and we really benefited from the Italian group and his lessons".

He retired aged 90 years, having become very frail, when he and Cynthia moved to a more tranquil life in Eastbourne, in the flat overlooking the sea which they had owned for many years.

David was a complex personality. Sensitive, emotional, loving and kind, charismatic and genuinely charming, he was a person of principle and integrity

who did not bear grudges for long. He was motivated by his passions rather than by money. He had a phenomenal memory which enabled him to lecture for lengthy periods without notes.

David had his idiosyncracies, as we all do. The determination, courage and drive which enabled him to run double marathons, overcome obstacles and survive the tragedies in his life could also be applied to getting his own way. He had no “small talk” (what most of us consider normal conversation), and, irritatingly, would only burst into life to deliver a lecture or lengthy deliberation – entrancing to some people, less so to those with a shorter attention span. A particularly startling phenomenon was his habit, when stressed, of shouting – unnerving when first encountered but which, like lightening, would disappear immediately to be replaced by his famous smile.

Through his courage, perseverance and capacity for hard work David achieved much, survived the traumatic times and enjoyed what life had to offer, making his own unique and significant contribution.

His son Benjamin will now talk to us about his emotions as his father was dying:

### ***MIO PADRE, FRA ESILIO E PERDONO***

#### ***From within exile and forgiveness***

לב בין גלות לסליחה

*English as a language of welcome and last greeting, death and birth. English for me relies on a mysterious border, marks a limit, a turning point, a circumfession, an impossible confidence. Birth and death, incommunicable passages. Unmistakably.*

*Confidence, being reliable means making mistakes. Being alive, as a secret that is whispering a confidence.*

*I was sitting next to your bed few days ago, the 15th of October, listening to you. You were in a very low voice, I was holding your hand. "Are you comfortable?" You asked me.*

*Va pensiero, Nabucco. Ti piaceva. Your warm hand was rhythmically tapping on mine. Went through old pictures, you were a boy, curly gentle face, feminine. So am I.*

*I brought your big bony hand on my face as if it were the first time, I felt moved, I recognized you, a tender desperation, a frail, feeble desolation of an innocent child. Last time I was two years old, I guess.*

*I seek you through me, forgive me. I imagine myself keeping a secret. I imagine myself taking your part. It is painful. The grief creates a force that supports a lack of support.*

*"I don't blame you for nothing" you told me the day before, the 14th, in English, with your exiled heart. "Do you want to change position on the armchair?" I was crying my compassion - Chemlah. "No, I'm a bit lazy at the moment...", and your unforgivable smile.*

*I came back to you as you returned to the inorganic. The movement of returning, teshuvà in Hebrew, is familiar. Between exile and forgiveness, between strictness and compassion: tifereth - תפארת - a center, as a responsibility, together with my sister here, an homage to the present moment, an obeisance to our absence.*

*My farewell to your farewell, my tender testimony to the unknown, to the stranger, the exile, גלות - golàt. My exile from the child and yours from the father. My unreturnable salutation to you.*

We often think of death as a cruel enemy, taking away those we love, but for those who are suffering or who have reached the end of their endurance, it can come as a quiet friend, closing the curtains, blowing out the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness.

I hope it was so for David

