

Eulogy for Herman Taube, by Merrill Leffler

I HAVE OFTEN BEEN INTRODUCED to Herman's friends as his editor and publisher. I've been that but I have been his close friend for more than thirty years and in our many and often long conversations, I have felt that is the big brother I needed but never had.

For hours over these last two days, I've sat with several of Herman's books, reading scores of his poems - some aloud, so that I could actually hear them. I am not being sentimental when I say that it was to hear what I've come to recognize over these years is his distinctive poetic voice. I *know* these poems and having published several of Herman's books I know many of them intimately:

Between the Shadows: New & Selected Poems (1985)
Autumn Travels, Devious Paths (1992)
Looking Back, Going Forward: New & Selected Poems (2002).

Another, a book of prose, *Uzbekistan Stories: A Jewish Medic During WWII*, is now in production - I am saddened that Herman didn't live to hold it in his hands

Reading his poems is like listening in on a conversation he is having with himself. The poet William Butler Yeats wrote that out of the arguments with others we make prose; out of the arguments with ourselves we make poetry. Poets write to cheer themselves up, a critic once said, and if the poem is good enough, the reader will be cheered too. But if the subjects include the darkest ones -- I'm thinking of the Holocaust - how is a reader to be cheered?

It is through the feelings the poems evoke and the way and manner the language gives voice to those feelings. The feelings are often sorrowful, though they don't stop there - while grief may never be far behind, there is a quiet and marvelous sense of joy in the world, in common things that most of us barely notice ("My Bathroom"!) and in nature though for Herman nature is never abstract. Read poems such as "Change of Seasons," Grasshoppers in My Yard," "The Butterfly."

Herman's language is near to what Wordsworth said he was striving for, the language common to men and women -- it is not poetic in any ordinary sense and yet in his cadenced lines that he self-deprecatingly called his "poetic notes" he could make the language sing.

*

*

*

Above it all, as Elie Wiesel wrote in the Foreword to *Between the Shadows*, Herman was a poet of witness: "You imagine him as cantor standing before a congregation praying, singing about a vanished world." But that's not all, as Wiesel accurately saw: "Despite all temptations and stumbling blocks, he writes with hope for the future."

I've known all this about Herman's poems but I was struck even more these last two days especially in reading his poems not as an editor and publisher but simply as a reader and listener who was, as though for the first time, amazed at the richly varied ways he took on the world of his experience, past and present.

I want to close with a poem *for* him, "Beginnings and Ends":

Here is the word
That divides the dark
And here is the word

That is filled with light

Here is the word
That severs the sea
And separates sky
And uncovers the earth

Here is the word
That revels in breath
And here is the word
That cleaves your soul

And here is the word
For singing your love
And here is another
For singing your grief

Here are the words
That will blind your eyes
That will freeze your tongue
That will strike you deaf

And here is the word
To open the dark
And here is another
To empty the light
And here is the last
To carry you home