

Dr David Cohen CBE 1930 - 2019



There have been numerous and high profile obituaries of the Suburb resident and philanthropist Dr David Cohen who died in August last year. They focus (and quite rightly so) on the illustrious career, numerous awards and achievements and the philanthropy of this extraordinary man. Hugely academic – his alma maters were Lincoln College, Oxford and Brandeis University (Massachusetts) where he was a Fulbright Scholar – the recipient of several prestigious prizes in the field of medicine plus a number of distinguished Fellowships to boot. But, despite all his many public achievements and family philanthropy, David was a very private man who loved the arts, nature and sense of community. He found and valued all of this in the Suburb, a place where he spent his childhood. In later years, David would return to the Suburb, feeling that he had “come home”.

David Cohen was the grandson of Eastern European immigrants who had fled the pogroms of the 1800s and settled in London's East End where they set up a dairy business. At the age of 12, David's father, John, had to take over the dairy when his father died. Clearly an astute and prescient businessman, John started to speculate and invest in property, purchasing a plot of land in, what is now Winnington Road but back then was merely farmland. John built a family home and moved his family there in 1938. The Cohen family became members of Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue in Norrice Lea and the young David walked across fields to University College School in Hampstead. War broke out soon afterwards and David recalled hearing and seeing

bombs dropping across the London skyline. The family had a bomb shelter in their garden and David recalled the nights when he and his family – and any extended family who might be staying – sheltered there. David celebrated VE Day with friends in Trafalgar Square and remembered sleeping on the lawn in front of the National Gallery, where years later, his wife Jillian Barker, the prominent arts administrator, would work and have to deal with uninvited ‘guests’ who also chose the lawn as a place to sleep.

Being only the second generation of Jewish refugees, David was acutely aware of his family's fate should Hitler win the war. He was extremely grateful to England and the security it offered, something that he never took for granted. The wartime fear of what the Germans would do to the British Jews if they invaded led him to comprehend fully the precariousness of his comfortable life, fostering a deep seated need to “give back”.

David was clearly a bright boy and when he made it known he wanted to go to Oxford University, his then headmaster bumped him up from the B to the A stream, knowing David would apply himself to fulfil this goal – which, of course, he did. After completing his National Service at Fontainebleau, David went to Lincoln College, Oxford, initially reading modern languages but subsequently switching to Oriental Studies. This included Hebrew and fulfilled David's desire to gain a greater knowledge of Judaism and his heritage. After graduating, David did a postgraduate degree in Jewish Philosophy at Brandeis University as a Fulbright Scholar. He was the first of his family to go to university and their pride must have been immense given such prestigious institutions. David's parents understood the value of a good education and David would have quite happily remained an academic. However, his father, John, wanted his son to do something more worldly and David became an estate agent – an unlikely career move for such a shy academic.

David's interest in people finally led him to change direction and he went on to study Medicine at the age of 30, qualifying when he was 36 at Westminster Hospital. He took his career as an NHS GP seriously and, true to the academic he was, never stopped learning. His deep interest in

holistic medicine (looking at both the mind and the body) led to a seat on the board of the prestigious Balint Society which deals with the understanding of the emotional content of the doctor-patient relationship. David was an excellent diagnostic doctor who “really listened” to his patients, always giving them more than the allocated time. He would not have enjoyed the strict time constraints of modern GP practices.

Music was one of David's great passions. He played the piano and listened ‘wall to wall’ to Radio 3. Through the John S. Cohen Foundation, set up by his father, David championed emerging composers. He strongly felt that if these new composers were not supported, music would ‘ossify’. Through his dedication to music and the arts generally, David was invited to serve on the boards of several arts institutions including the Royal Ballet Schools, the Royal Opera House, the National Theatre Development Council and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra Trust.

Another of David's great passions was literature. The bookshelves in his Temple Fortune home bear testament to this. He set up the David Cohen Prize for Literature in 1993 (he had to be persuaded to add his name) and attended all the judges' deliberations, enjoying the discussions on the merits (or otherwise) of the potential prize recipients. It was educative and satisfied his constant curiosity. David believed the power of culture was both ‘healing and edifying’. It is worth noting that many of the winners went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Seamus Heaney and V.S. Naipaul to name just two.

David moved back to the Suburb in 2001. He and Jillian chose a “simple and authentic” Arts and Crafts style cottage in Temple Fortune (within the Suburb boundary). As a young boy, David had often walked around the streets of the Suburb with his father, discussing the rich and varied architecture and he wanted to be back in the place he had loved so much. On return journeys to the Suburb, the first sighting of St Jude's

steeple would make his heart “leap with joy”. Ensnared back in the Suburb, David threw himself into the local community, forming lasting friendships. He joined the Residents Association, was an active member of the Wednesday Walking Group and sat on the Management Committee of Fellowship House. In the words of Andrew Botterill, Fellowship House Management Committee member and friend “David was a great supporter of Fellowship and everything it embodies and we will all remember his gentle good humour... his incisive wisdom provided an invaluable guide to our deliberations.” David also actively supported the Proms at St Jude's, attending one of its wonderful concerts just a few weeks before his death.

David cared deeply about nature. He loved birdsong and took great pleasure from walks in Bigwood. Sadly, his fourth battle with cancer proved too much and he spent his last few days in the place he loved best, at home in the ‘cosy’ cottage, with Jillian. They would take walks around their garden together, looking at flowers and plants and listening to the birdsong. And it was here in his beloved Suburb home that his family (including his daughters Imogen and Olivia, his four grandchildren and his sister) as well as his friends were able to say their goodbyes before David finally died peacefully on 4th August 2019, listening to one of his favourite operas, with his cherished Jillian.

David Cohen was a modest, unassuming, perhaps even an old-fashioned man, who valued people, culture and community and spent his life nurturing them. He will, clearly, be remembered for his philanthropy but also, by those who knew the private man, for his wonderful dry wit which he maintained right up until the end of his life. David had wished heaven to be a place where there were no mobile phones, all grammar was correct, composers' names were pronounced right and there were double portions of ice cream. Let's hope he was pleasantly surprised.

SHELLEY-ANNE SALISBURY



Clara's foodbank collection

In December last year Gemma Chapman took her daughter Clara, aged 6, along to Finchley Foodbank to donate food.

Clara was really taken by the experience and was determined that she and her family should try to help more. Clara told her school (Annemount) about the foodbank and it was decided that the school would organise

a food collection. Clara also made pictures to sell to family and neighbours and managed to raise £11.20 which she then spent on food to donate to the foodbank. Clara and her Daddy are now working on making candles at home to sell in an effort to raise more funds to spend on food for the foodbank. Well done Clara!

Free Church food bank update

Throughout the year the Free Church collects and delivers food weekly to the food bank in Colindale. Pat and Lisa, the friendly helpers there are always grateful for contributions of non-perishable food and many people within the church and from the Suburb community add to this collection. Food is given out twice a week and they welcome and serve many needy families.

However, due to the restrictions in place it isn't possible to deliver at the moment. They understand this, and would be pleased to receive money gifts as they have ways of accessing supplies directly.

You may be supporting other requests for help, but if you would like to learn more about their work, or make a donation, further details can be found at www.colindale.foodbank.org.uk.

Tell the grandchildren

While we have unexpected time to mull over our own lives as we sit at home self-isolating, how many of us wish we had asked our parents and grandparents much more about theirs? Whether old or young, this might be a great time to write down and record your own memories of life on the Suburb – little anecdotes, memories of past friends and neighbours, things that happened here on great occasions or just little family ones, photographs... Write them by hand or on the computer,

record them on your phone. Not only will your own memories be there for your family, but the HGS Virtual Museum (www.hgsheritage.org.uk) would love to hear from you too. The plan is to pull together all the memories we receive and create a unique perspective on Suburb history. Over to you... Memories to marjorie.harris@hgsheritage.org.uk, or send them to HGS Heritage, 48 Erskine Hill, NW11 6HG. Don't forget to include your name and phone number.

MARJORIE HARRIS



TO-DO LIST

What's on your to-do list whilst you are staying home?

- Learn to make sourdough bread
- Clean out the shed
- Review my insurance

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For a **commercial** quote, call 0208 353 8940
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