

SUBURB SPRING

featuring Ian Phillips

Shortly after I had completed my interview with Ian he sent me an email in which he referred to his 'seemingly endless ravings'. My only reply could be that his 'ravings' were witty, sometimes contentious, but always highly entertaining and delivered with great charm, eloquence and gusto.

Ian was born and bred in North London. He attended Woodhouse Grammar and graduated from University with a law degree in 1975. When he met his wife, Elaine, who is a dental hygienist, she was already a confirmed Suburbite. They married in 1984 and moved to a house opposite Willifield Green where they have lived for 28 years. They have two sons, Ben and Adam who both attended the Garden Suburb School, Christ's College and then Woodhouse 6th Form College (where Ian is now the Chairman of the Governors). Immediately Ian shared his wife's love of the Suburb which he describes as, 'A village in the city where the spring blossom on Willifield Way is stunning'.

In the same year as his marriage, Ian joined Robert Maxwell's book publishing division which specialised in law and business. His first project involved putting together a book on fraud but, as he ruefully says, "It was not meant to be a DIY Manual for Robert himself!" He remained there for 4 years before moving to an advertising agency where he built up a strong network of clients which would prove invaluable when he was made redundant in 1993. He then went freelance advising businesses on communications and marketing. He describes this as being 'a cerebral tart for rent' but he was certainly successful travelling widely – particularly to Amsterdam where he has had long term associations with Philips Electronics.

Although Ian and Elaine were both born to Jewish parents they had never practised their faith – in fact, both were atheists and had not told either of their children that they were Jewish. However, when Ben returned from junior school one day he told his parents that many of the children had been celebrating Jewish New Year and because of this they decided that it was only fair to tell the boys of their heritage. This did not mean that Ian changed his mind about his religion, but it did make him ask certain questions. He could not escape the fact that he was a Jew, even if he could not be a believer. So, after much thought, he decided to write a book which would be, as he calls it 'a convergence of the nature of Jewish identity and the mystery of great music'.

Ian has had a passion for Beethoven's music since his teenage years and on his 21st birthday his

father gave him a biography of the composer and a LP of his late String Quartets. As Ian says, "It took me over 6 years before I had some semblance of understanding his Grosse Fugue. Before that time I just couldn't get it but I now firmly believe that it is the greatest piece of catharsis in music. So, I decided to call my novel Grosse Fugue."

It took Ian years of research – particularly regarding the Holocaust – before he finally put down his pen and the book was finished. He describes the experience as 'the loneliness of the long distance writer'. The book's hero is Reuben Mendel and it charts his life from child prodigy virtuoso violinist to soldier in the First World War and life in post-war Austria that is violently interrupted by the Holocaust. As the book's publisher describes it, 'the book sweeps through London, Vienna, Paris, Toulouse, Auschwitz and beyond tracking the fate of Reuben Mendel and his family, played out against the seismic events of the 20th Century. It provocatively examines the legacy of genocide, survivor guilt and the redemptive power of great music.' When I asked Ian if he would have liked to be Reuben, he answered, "Only in so far as if I was reincarnated I would like to be the first violinist in a string quartet". The book which was published in June has had 5-star ratings on the Amazon website.

Last Autumn Ian and Elaine went to Krakow. "We were profoundly moved and not just by the camps. Oscar Schindler's office has been made into a museum and we saw a silent film made before the war showing the thriving Jewish Quarter where some 22,000 people lived. It was so lively and vibrant now it is so sad and lonely. The monument in the Ghetto is a group of empty chairs. It's hard to imagine anything more poignant."

I asked Ian where he walked for inspiration and he immediately answered, "I cross the Heath Extension onto the Heath itself and wander round the pools listening to Beethoven, Bach or Schubert on my ipod. The sun streams through the trees and I sing at the top of my voice, scaring the ducks. It is there that I would like my memorial bench."

Ian is now planning another book but I have been sworn to secrecy about the content... Please watch this space! **S**



Ian Phillips



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