

Obituary

Leon Eisenberg

A Towering Figure in World Psychiatry

What can one add to the detailed obituary that Harvard University published in Wikipedia? Leon was a proud Jewish professional who used his familiarity with Judaism to spruce up his brilliant and mind-expanding presentations with Jewish jokes and quotes. (And Jewish jokes he did know! To watch two scholars, Leon Eisenberg and Joseph Zubin, exchange Jewish jokes was an experience never to forget.) As for quotes, I recall a seminal article where he called for the application of what the field knew about primary prevention. The title he borrowed, If not now, when? (*Am J Orthopsychiatry* 1962; 32:781-793), came from Hillel's quote in the Mishna.

Leon Eisenberg was born in 1922 in Philadelphia to Russian-Jewish immigrants who came to America in the search of a safer and better world. This was largely accomplished, and yet Leon Eisenberg had to experience the latent anti-Semitism of which not even America was free. In a farewell letter Leon sent to family and friends he could not but rejoice that his battle against discrimination was a resounding success: "I was not wanted in medical schools but I became a professor and chairmen, first in Johns Hopkins and later in Harvard, leading universities." At the last WPA Congress held in Prague he received an award, the last of a long list he accrued over his career that ended only a few months before his death. His candidacy for an award to be granted during the previous WPA Congress in Cairo did not prosper. His CV fully justified the award while the list of supporters of his candidacy included the "Who's who" in world psychiatry. He accepted the award in Prague with no resentment, since for him the Cairo rejection was just one of the obstacles he

always succeeded in overcoming.

Perhaps belonging to a minority made him into the staunch liberal psychiatrist that many of his colleagues did not appreciate - but could not help respect (Rudolf Virchow: The physician as politician. *Medicine and War* 1986; 2:243-250). As an expression of his vision he wrote in his farewell letter of another success he had witnessed "My life is full, I was able to see that a Black American became president of the US." Dr. Carola Eisenberg, his spouse for 42 years, accompanied him fully in their support of human rights in psychiatry.

Leon Eisenberg has too long a list of contributions to summarize here. Two of his more recent papers reflected his full understanding how the social environment makes a brain and how the brain makes the environment (The social construction of the human brain. *Am J Psychiatry* 1995;152: 1563-1575). He resisted with powerful arguments that there is neither a brainless mind nor a mindless brain (Mindlessness and brainlessness in psychiatry. *Brit J Psychiatry* 1986; 148:497-508). For him the person is too complex a being to reduce it to cells, while the environment cannot express itself in the person without a biological structure.

Leon was a dear friend, a true "*eitzegiver*" (mentor), his e-mails full of warmth and fun, his letter of farewell left Miriam and myself with tears of sadness and happiness at having been among those who witnessed such a fulfilled life.

Aged 87, Leon Eisenberg has died - but many follow his path. This knowledge gave him solace when his life went into a quick sunset.

Itzhak Levav, Jerusalem