



Wald's memorial to martyred European Jewry at Westpark Cemetery.

Photo: S.A. Press Service

## OUR DEBT TO HERMAN WALD

### Inspiring legacy of a great artist

By EDGAR BERNSTEIN

Herman Wald, who did so much to enhance the statuary of Johannesburg and got so little in return, had his dying wish fulfilled when he was laid to rest in the Westpark Cemetery last week: he was buried at the foot of the monument he had created to martyred European Jewry, looking up to its six great Shofaroth, clenched in giant hands, ready for the last trump which, according to legend, will awaken the dead on Judgment Day.

They all came to his funeral—the friends, old and new, whom his warmheartedness had attracted; the patrons whom his soft-heartedness had treated too generously; the rich who had bargained him down to prices that meant little beside what they lost at cards or on a horse . . .

I knew Herman Wald from the time he came to South Africa in 1937, and in the three decades of our friendship I could not help noting the number of wealthy people who were not loath to accept his hospitality at the parties he gave in his studio, but never became buyers of the work a sculptor must sell to live.

#### YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Herman Wald was a full-time sculptor. When necessity drove him to accept other work, it was always a very temporary arrangement: he quickly gave up these un congenial jobs in order to get back to the work that was the meaning of life to him—the sculpture that was his passion, his delight, his consolation and his pride.

He was fortunate in that he found a wife who understood his dream and his drive, knew that he had to create even when he had no bread—and herself went working to help keep home and family. I don't think I have ever met a woman more devoted to her husband than brave, good-natured, ever-optimistic Vera, happy that fate, chance, God or what-you-will had crossed her path with Herman's, so that she would spend her strength to cherish his genius. She and their children remain with his lambent memory—their daughter Pamela, their sons Michael and Louie.

Herman struggled all his life. In his youthful years in Hungary, his father Rabbi Jacob Wald, was opposed to Herman taking up either of the two loves of his childhood, music or sculpture: he wanted the boy to follow him into the rabbinate. So Herman earned money singing in synagogue choirs and opera choruses to finance his lessons in art, and

literally "sang his way" to Vienna to study sculpture under Prof. Hanak, and to Berlin, to study under Prof. Tortola. Then he worked as a teacher at an art school in London before he came to settle in South Africa.

#### GREAT SCULPTURES

He grew, he matured, he became, through his own efforts, a great sculptor—just how great, people will only come to realise now that he is dead.

As I stood among the mourners at his funeral, looking up at that lofty monument he had moulded to the memory of European Jewry butchered by the Nazis, I was inspired anew by the magnitude of its conception. Shadowed by the Second Commandment ("thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image"), Herman had avoided using the human form, used only those massive fists on a flat base, put between their clenched fingers six great ramshorns (the Shofar of Jewish tradition), one to memorialise each million of the slaughtered martyrs, the horns uplifted in pairs to form three arches over an eternal flame, the frozen smoke of which traced the words of the Sixth Commandment: "Lo Tirtzach"—"Thou shalt not kill"

I remembered the communal arguments at the time—the long debate before that monument was placed in the position it now occupies. It should have been placed at the top of the roadway, in front of the Obel; but the committee of the time thought it wasn't proper—that it might make the Obel itself, as it were, seem like a monument to the six million dead—so they assigned it a position away from the Obel, in that portion of the cemetery where the soldiers are buried, that seeming to them a more appropriate association . . . Perhaps in the end it worked out for the best, for at least the present committee agreed to let Herman be buried next to the monument, which they wouldn't have done if it had stood in front of the Obel.

#### ANGUISH AND JOY

Impelled by memories of Herman, I went to see again his other public statuary. In the grounds of the Jewish Aged Home in Sandringham stands his second memorial to martyred European Jewry, his statue "Kria"—the grief-ridden figure rending his garment in the ritual act of mourning and defiantly baring his breast to heaven, as though to challenge God: "Kill me, too, if you wish . . ."

And then I went to the Oppenheimer Fountain, behind the Riskik Street post office, in the middle of the city. Here there was no trace of the grim associations of those Jewish monuments. Here was the world on the morning of the sixth day of creation, before man was fashioned with his blessing and his curse. Light and joy were here in the arching bow of impala, leaping across the fountain's spray . . . I stood like one renewed after the encounter with

death, refreshed by the gleam and tinkle of falling water, rippling muscles, joie-de-vivre—the ever-recurring intoxication of life's promise of goodness . . .

I went home in better mood, to think of other works by Herman Wald: the wings of the Shekinah wrapped round the Holy Ark at the Berea Synagogue; Moses with the Ten Commandments, one of his early studies; his magnificent monument to Helen Keller shown at his last exhibition early this year; that other massive study he designed as a war memorial: the prone soldier, face to the ground, dead; his delightful figurine, "The Sufrette", which he gave me as a gift; his wood carvings and studies in pure form.

#### HEBREW THEMES

His art was universal, but deeply influenced by Hebrew themes. Some of his best work was entirely Jewish in concept: not only the two monuments already mentioned, but the numerous studies he did of dancing Chassidim; Klesmerim with their fiddles; old Jewish types; the wives of the Patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac; Jacob's Ladder; Job; and other biblical themes.

Why, with all that richness of production, did he not receive the material returns it deserved to bring him? Probably because he was too entirely the artist for the rat-race of modern life. He could not commercialise his art; he had neither the taste nor the ability to master the business handling of the work he produced.

He was a wonderful friend—warm, buoyant, hearty. He loved good company, good talk, good drink, good food—enjoyed nothing more than throwing a party with all of them in his studio on those occasions when, receiving a cheque for a commission, he wanted to celebrate . . . He was also a teacher of distinction, who helped several of our artists to fulfil the promise he saw in them . . .

Next to sculpture, he loved music, and next to music, writing—especially epigrams, of which he has left a considerable store. He also wrote, in recent years, some chapters of autobiography which he was planning to publish, with his epigrams and photos of his work. His widow hopes to carry this project to fruition . . .

The Jewish community owes a debt to the memory of Herman Wald. It would be a fitting gesture if it were to sponsor a commemorative exhibition of the rich work he has left behind.



The last photograph of Herman Wald, taken as he was arranging his exhibition of the President Hotel, Johannesburg, last March.

Photo: S.A. Press Service