

W. Gunther Plaut (1912–2012)



W. Gunther Plaut (1912–2012)
 (Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

W. Gunther Plaut, who passed away on 8 February 2012 at age 99, was a rare combination of scholar, pulpit rabbi, and community activist. In an age when congregational duties left few rabbis with time for scholarly pursuits, Plaut authored or edited more than twenty books and numerous articles. Without question, his most significant work was *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, which he edited and largely authored for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (today's Union for Reform Judaism). Followed by a Haftarah commentary, it went through two editions, sold nearly 120,000 copies, was translated into German and Russian, and—to his own surprise—became a standard work, used in

the vast majority of Reform, as well as some other liberal, congregations. Because of his contribution, Reform Judaism no longer needed to rely on commentaries that lacked the integrated critical and sympathetic approach to the text characteristic of the movement. Plaut's scholarly endeavors shaped Reform Judaism in other ways, as well. Believing in the importance of structure for liberal religious practice, he authored the first Reform guide for Sabbath observance, participated in the writing of Reform responsa, and contributed to Reform Judaism's own historical memory with two volumes of sources, one from the European Reform experience and one from the American, plus a study reader that focuses on the most recent developments. His popular books were devoted to subjects such as Jewish chosenness, the Jews of Minnesota, Judaism and the scientific spirit, and the history of the Magen David. He even wrote a historical novel devoted to the intriguing messianic pretender Jacob Frank. A few years ago he was planning a volume of poetry, which, alas, he was not able to complete.

Plaut led congregations in Chicago and St. Paul, after which, from 1961 to 1977, he served as the senior rabbi of Canada's leading Reform congregation, Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, where he gained the reputation of being an effective, intellectual preacher. Following his retirement, he continued to visit his office regularly in his capacity as senior scholar. Although he was not shy about taking controversial stands—for example, against rabbis officiating at mixed marriages—he was widely respected by his colleagues. They elected him to serve as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis from 1983 to 1985. Within the CCAR he championed giving greater emphasis to the

Saturday morning service. His activities beyond Reform Judaism included his presidency of the Canadian Jewish Congress from 1977 to 1980, his service as vice-chair of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and his regular articles for the Canadian press.

Wolf Günther Plaut (he removed the umlaut when he came to America) was born on 1 November 1912 in Münster, Germany. There his parents ran a Jewish orphanage that gave birth to perhaps the first modern *havurah*, where men and women sat together, laity conducted services, and the young Günther celebrated his bar mitzvah. In 1934 he received a law degree from Berlin University, but after Nazi Germany closed off the possibility of a career as an attorney, he began studies for the rabbinate at the liberal seminary in Berlin. In 1935 he was among a small group of its students brought to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati by President Julian Morgenstern, who thereby likely saved his life. It was while he was a student that he met the late Elizabeth Strauss, his wife of sixty-five years. He was ordained by HUC in 1939, and upon receiving citizenship in 1943 enlisted as a chaplain in the U.S. Army. His son, Jonathan V. Plaut (1942–2012), likewise became a Reform rabbi. A fiercely competitive individual, especially on the tennis court (I once had the experience of playing against him), Plaut was determined to continue his activities despite growing older. In 1999 he published a poignant, reflective volume titled *The Price and Privilege of Growing Old*. Sadly, it was not long thereafter that his own powers began to wane, and he was eventually unable to communicate.

In 1988 Plaut contributed a short piece to a symposium published in *The American Jewish Archives Journal* on the subject, “The German-Jewish Legacy in America, 1938–1988.” In his essay for the symposium Plaut wrote, “The final destruction of German Jewry which was set in motion on *Kristallnacht* made its unplanned contribution to the New World.” Rabbi Plaut was surely a most significant element in that contribution. His papers are divided between the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa and the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. His memory lives on through his daughter Judith and his grandchildren, and among all who knew him.

Michael A. Meyer

Deanna Zeff Gottschalk (1939–2012)

It is with profound sorrow that The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives notes the passing of Deanna Zeff Gottschalk on March 16, 2012, at age 73. A native Cincinnati, Mrs. Gottschalk was married for thirty-two years to Dr. Alfred Gottschalk (1930–2009), president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion from 1971 to 1996. Upon her passing, Mrs. Gottschalk was memorialized by the school for sharing her husband’s “devotion to our institution, governors, overseers, students, faculty



Deanna Zeff Gottschalk (1939–2012), right, with her husband, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk (1930–2009)
(Courtesy Charley Frank)

and staff, and for her gracious warmth.” Her work at the College–Institute coincided with—and reflected—the enlarged role and voice of women in the Jewish and general communities, as exemplified by her husband’s ordination of the first female rabbi in 1972 and by a growing call for gender equity throughout the Reform movement. In this vein, Mrs. Gottschalk combined her role as “First Lady” of the College-Institute with her own career as a social worker and family therapist. A graduate of the University of Cincinnati and Smith College, she held positions at Cincinnati’s Jewish Family Service, the Glen Manor Home for Jewish Aged, and the Jewish Community Center. Her specialty was individual and marital therapy where, as the JFS noted, she had “a strong interest in emphasizing strengths in individuals and families, and in helping them reach optimum levels of functioning.”

Those who knew her marveled at her endless grace and charm, no matter how many demands were put on her. This trait, which her son, Charley, called her “remarkable empathy,” was at the core of her humanity. Her ability to listen, be aware, and instinctively be sensitive to each person she met was a rare gift. The Marcus Center extends heartfelt condolences to all who knew and loved her, particularly her two sons, Andrew and Charley, their families, and her stepchildren, Marc Gottschalk and Rachel Brenner. For all those who mourn may there be abundant peace, comfort, and life during this time.

Kevin Proffitt

Louise Bergman Stern (1911–2012)

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives notes with great sadness the passing of Louise Bergman Stern, who was 100 years old at the time of her death. Born in Chillicothe, Ohio, Mrs. Stern was the wife and lifelong partner of esteemed American Jewish Archives genealogist Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern (1915–1994). She married ‘Mac’ in 1941 while he was completing his rabbinical studies at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. During their fifty-two years of marriage, Mrs. Stern was a devoted *rebbitzin* while simultaneously pursuing her own career as an editor and writer. Following Rabbi Stern’s ordination, the couple traveled to Philadelphia, where he was assistant rabbi at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel. Rabbi Stern then served as a chaplain in the Army Air Corps during World War II. In 1947, the Sterns moved to Congregation Ohef Shalom in Norfolk, Virginia. During this time, Rabbi and Mrs. Stern were vigorous—and public—proponents for

integration in this segregated southern town, relying on each other when the inevitable criticisms and condemnations rained down on them. In 1964 Rabbi Stern's colleagues asked him to leave Norfolk and become the first director for the Joint Commission on Placement of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. This move to New York City allowed Mrs. Stern to fully develop as a professional copy editor. For many years she worked at the Crown Publishing Group, editing best-sellers such as *Scruples*, by Judith Krantz, and working with many well-known authors. She also, as her husband often noted, was an invaluable assistant in editing his renowned volumes on American Jewish genealogy, *Jews of American Descent* and *First American Jewish Families*. Rabbi and Mrs. Stern traveled the world together, worked together, and supported each other's interests. As Rabbi Joseph Glaser noted in his eulogy at Rabbi Stern's funeral in 1994, "Each was an individual, with solid career accomplishments and yet, Malcolm and Louise was one word." As we mark the end of life of this great friend of the American Jewish Archives, we extend, to all who knew and loved her, our sincerest condolences. May her memory be always for a blessing.



Louise Bergman Stern (1911–2012)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Kevin Proffitt