

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

ELIE ABEL

(1920-2004)

Elie Abel was an extraordinarily accomplished journalist in print and broadcasting, the author of seminal books on the conduct of American foreign policy in the Cold War era, a force for press freedom at UNESCO, and a distinguished educator, at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and Stanford's Department of Communication. He was an intellectual, who admired what he called "the well-furnished mind," and those who knew him could not but be unaware that his mind was completely furnished, and tastefully decorated with wit, wisdom, and a keen eye for truth. He died of pneumonia, in Rockville, Maryland on July 22, 2004.

His beginnings were modest. His grandfather Mark emigrated from Ukraine to Saskatchewan as a contracted laborer, to help build the railway. Elie was born in Montreal, to Rose Abel, who had been a seamstress and union organizer, and Jacob Abel, a printer. His uncle David Abel was a cinematographer for RKO, where he photographed many of the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films of the 1930's.

Elie earned a B.A. from McGill University in 1941, and a Master's Degree from the Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in 1942. He reported for the Windsor (Ontario) Star before enlisting in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and on his return to civilian life he became a reporter the Montreal Gazette. He progressed rapidly in journalism, going to Berlin for the North American Newspaper Alliance to cover the Nuremberg Trials of the top Nazi war criminals, then joining the Overseas News Agency, to cover the United Nations and, in 1949, the New York Times, for which he reported from Detroit, Washington, Belgrade, and New Delhi, for the next 10 years.

His assignment to Belgrade began shortly before the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and he was deeply involved in covering the events and analyzing their ramifications in the East bloc. He wrote with a characteristic terseness, precision, and deep knowledge of international politics. On November 3, 1956 he filed a story that began:

"Vienna, Saturday November 3—Soviet tanks sealed off the Austrian-Hungarian frontier last night as if to bar the door to the West before dealing sternly with anti-Communist revolutionaries."

Elie was part of the New York Times team that won a Pulitzer Prize for Foreign Reporting for coverage of the Hungarian revolt.

In Belgrade, he covered the trial of dissident Milovan Djilas, and the subsequent purge of former Tito colleague Vladimir Dedijer for supporting Djilas.

On September 26, 1957, Elie Abel filed a story from Belgrade that began:

“Recant or starve: that is the ultimatum served on Vladimir Dedijer by the Tito regime in Yugoslavia.

“Unlike his friend, Milovan Djilas, now serving a three-year prison sentence, Vlado Dedijer is a free man. He is free, but he may not work to support his wife and five children. He is free, but he may not travel out of the country. He is free, but he may not publish any of his writings, however non-political, inside Yugoslavia. He is free, but his old friends are warned to shun his company.”

In Belgrade, the Abel family befriended the Dedijer family, including a son who was to commit suicide at the age of 13 after they left because of the continual taunting of his school-mates who called him an “enemy of the regime.”

From New Delhi, Abel covered the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet to Nepal, reported on the beginnings of the “Green revolution,” and interviewed virtually every significant Indian political figure of the time.

In 1959, Abel returned to the United States and became Washington Bureau Chief for the Detroit News, where he covered the last years of the Eisenhower administration, and in 1961, at the beginning of the Kennedy Administration, he moved to the new medium of television, first as NBC's State Department correspondent, then as London Bureau Chief, and later as Diplomatic correspondent back in Washington. This was an audacious decision for some of his friends, who still associated him the prestigious New York Times. In an oral history interview for the Kennedy Library, he said:

I kept running into people, not just in the bureaucracy, but in the intellectual world, who after I'd been on the air almost every day for seven years, were still quite sure that I was with the New York Times because they didn't watch television....This, of course, applies not merely to the bureaucracy. I can think of a good friend of mine, a very distinguished American literary critic called Lionel Trilling... Lionel and his wife Diana came over to England while we were living there--he was visiting professor at Oxford for a year. One day there was a Columbia University alumni dinner in London. Lionel spoke as did Jacques Barzun. I remember, Diana Trilling came running up to me--this was '66, I'd been on the air for five years--and she said, “Oh, I'm afraid they've messed up the place cards.” And I said, “What do you mean?” And she said, “They've got you down as representing NBC.” And I said, “What's wrong with that, Diana?” She said, “You're with the New York Times,” I said. “I resigned from the New York Times in 1959.” Well, she, being a somewhat strong-minded woman, proceeded to argue the case with me.

In 1970, Elie Abel took on the Deanship of his alma mater, the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. The Columbia Journalism school was known, fondly or otherwise, as “boot-camp for the New York Times,” and concentrated narrowly on the what were then known as the “green eyeshade” skills of writing and reporting. Elie saw that effective reporting depended on context and knowledge, and journalism should be more than reporting only the moment. He realized as well that television was a potent force in news, and brought in Fred Friendly, who had been Edward R. Murrow's producer at CBS, to organize a broadcast journalism program.

In 1978, a journalism billet came open in the Department of Communication, and the Chandler family offered to endow a chair. The chair and senior faculty were unanimous in the belief that the right person was Elie Abel, but there was no chance that he would leave Columbia for Stanford. The late Professor Lyle Nelson took the position that the senior faculty was probably right, but there was no harm in asking, so he dropped in on him at Columbia one afternoon while he was in New York on other university business, and asked, and Elie Abel did not say no.

There then began what the department described as the “courtship of Elie Abel,” and when he visited Stanford, he was struck by the very easy interaction of faculty across school and department borders. He came to Stanford and became the inaugural Chandler Professor of Communication, and eventually became Chair of the Department of Communication. Subsequently, in his fifteen years at Stanford, he formed close collegial relationships with faculty in History, Political Science especially, but also in Physics, engineering and the School of Medicine. Lunch with Elie Abel at the Faculty Club was a sophisticated conversation with an immensely knowledgeable and well-informed colleague about the state of the nation and the world, and many of his colleagues eagerly look forward to spending informal time with him.

Elie Abel’s first book, *The Missile Crisis*, was the first detailed examination of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1961, and remains a landmark in diplomatic journalism. With another distinguished broadcast journalist, Marvin Kalb, he wrote *Roots of Involvement: The U.S. in Asia*, which contextualized the American involvement of that period in Vietnam. With W. Averell Harriman, he wrote *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-46*, a diplomatic biography. He wrote many other books and articles, and as a member of the UNESCO McBride Commission, he was a key defender of press freedom, which was under attack in UNESCO. The McBride Report, *Many Voices, One World*, is a ringing endorsement of the importance of press freedom.

He was elected to Stanford’s Academic Senate in 1984, and served as its Chair from September 1985 until June, 1986. As Chair of the senate, he overcame what had become a tradition of limited press access. In a letter to the faculty he wrote “I believe the level of debate in the Senate is, on the whole, high, and that our debates, when reported in area newspapers by reporters who are allowed to watch and listen, can be expected to increase public understanding of the university’s needs and priorities.”

In addition to his distinguished record as a writer, broadcaster, and administrator Elie was fondly admired by his students and colleagues.

Elie Abel was honored in virtually every way a journalist could be. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, he was recognized by a George Foster Peabody award for radio news in 1967, and Overseas Press Club awards for Foreign Reporting in 1969 and 1970. In 1998, he was awarded the Grand Prize for Press Freedom of the Inter-American Press Association for his work on the McBride Commission [I deleted the redundant mention of “press freedom”].

He is survived by his widow, Charlotte Page Dunn Abel of Washington, D.C., his daughter Suzanne Abel, of Mountain View, his son Mark Abel of Carlsbad, California, and a granddaughter, Marina Vidor of London, England. His first wife of 45 years, Corinne Prevost Abel died in 1991.

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