Tributes to William Helmreich, z”l

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William (“Willy”) Helmreich (1946–2020) taught at The Graduate Center and at City College of New York starting in the ’70s until he passed away on March 28, 2020, from the coronavirus. We begin with an excerpt from the tribute published on the CUNY Academic Hub by Professor Lynn Chancer, Executive Officer of the CUNY Ph.D. Program in Sociology. What follows are tributes sent by his colleagues to the listserv of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry and compiled with permission by Sarah Bunin Benor, April 2, 2020.

I wrote all of you a few days ago informing you, with great sadness, about the death of William (“Willy”) Helmreich, (1946–2020) who taught at The Graduate Center and at City College starting in the ’70s until he passed away earlier this week, on March 28, from the coronavirus now devastating our city, nation, and the world. Many fortunate Graduate Center students and alums came to know Willy for his wondrous and encyclopedic knowledge of New York City and for his ethnographic commitments, sensibility, and determination to share with students, faculty, and the world the multifaceted preciousness of our shared urban home that he called “the world’s greatest outdoor museum.”

But what I did not know about Willy were things I learned not from him directly but through the outpouring of articles, coverage (in and beyond The Graduate Center), and emails that have been paying steady tribute to his life and the importance of his work—some of which, including from CNN and *The New York Times* and (most recently) The Graduate Center’s own tribute, can be seen below.

I did not know, for example, that Willy came to the USA as a child from Switzerland and that his parents were Holocaust survivors. Nor did I know that he had written 18 books, including *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry*, making him a scholar of religion as well as of urban life. While I knew of his famous *The New York Nobody Knows* (for which he walked 6048 miles to cover every city block in 4 years and wore out nine pairs of shoes), I did not know that—as *The Guardian* recounted

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in its rave review (November 29, 2013)—the book was partly inspired by Willy and his father playing “Last Stop,” a game whereby they rode the subway from 103rd Street on the West Side to the end of the line like “intrepid explorers” after which “they would discover the area’s secrets on foot.” Nor did I realize that after Princeton University Press offered him five new book contracts (one for each borough after the *New York* volume’s earlier success), Willy had already finished *The Manhattan Nobody Knows*. According to Sam Roberts at *The New York Times* (September 6, 2018), “William B. Helmreich has done it again”; as Roberts continues, “Professor Helmreich is not the sort of tour guide who can be supplanted by a fact sheet, no matter how encyclopedic. He is, first off, a storyteller. His New York narratives are drawn from the extraordinary characters he more or less randomly encounters along his route.” Then too, as Mitch Duneier, an admirer himself of Willy’s ethnographic work, pointed out, Princeton University Press is about to bring out *The Queens Nobody Knows* in the fall; Willy, with great and apparently characteristic attention to detail, had just recently endorsed the book’s cover-to-be with enthusiasm.

Last but not least, I did not know enough about Willy to realize how avidly his students enjoyed and were engaged by his classes at City College and The Graduate Center. Whereas *Rate My Professors* often portrays faculty negatively and ungenerously, when looking up Willy, one is greeted with sincere-sounding and close-to-perfect rave reviews such as “He’s a caring person, he’s amazing”; “His class was very inspiring”; “Best professor I ever had”; and “... his class was always something to look forward to.”

Before turning to colleagues’ vignettes and memories, though, I wish to confess that I myself did not know Willy very well before becoming the Executive Officer of the Sociology Program nearly 3 years ago. But I recall, now very fondly and meaningfully, his walking into my office to introduce himself and starting to tell me about his five-book series with pride and patience. Willy seemed (even at first meeting) so kind and friendly and utterly committed to teaching and participating in the life of The City University of New York—his beloved academic home. He did a “First Friday” lunch in our Ph.D. program that I attended, usually an hour-long event but which went over (to more than 2 h) as Willy captivated the faculty and students assembled with his amazing stories and knowledge of the New York nobody but he seemed to know with such assiduous detail and from patient scholarly excavation. It makes me sad, as I write this, to recall that we had an appointment this May for Willy to take me on a long walk into Queens neighborhoods. Yet his books—and most of all, his amazing commitment to New York City, a place now struggling, but which I suspect Willy would trust can emerge even stronger from our current trials—will go on to delight and interest New Yorkers, locally and from afar, academics as well as a wider range of readers. Willy himself, I believe, would be proud of the respect and love his life and work have inspired.

Professor Lynn Chancer

Great Neck Synagogue notes with sorrow the passing of our member William Helmreich, beloved husband of Helaine and beloved father of Jeffrey (and Esty) Helmreich, Joseph (and Dini) Helmreich, and Deborah (and Joshua) Halpern.

The graveside funeral will take place tomorrow and, in keeping with current community standards, it will be limited to a minyan (including family). Due to restrictions currently in place, the family will be sitting shiva privately and there will be no shiva visits. We will send out appropriate contact information as soon as it is available.

May the family be comforted among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem.

Samuel Heilman

I greatly regret the departure of Prof. William Helmreich, a leading Jewish sociologist and Shoah scholar and a good friend and colleague, and I wish to present the family with my sincere condolences.

Yehi Zichro Baruch

Sergio DellaPergola

This news fills me with so much sadness. I have so much respect and admiration for Bill as well as many memories of walking the streets of New York with him to research his books on New York.

My deepest condolences to his wife and sons.

Laura Limonic

Very sad news indeed. Willy was always very up and positive about Judaism and the Jewish people in his scholarship and his personal life.

I wish Hennie and the family, according to the Minhag Anglia, a long life.

Barry Kosmin

I'm very sorry to hear this. I did not have the pleasure of meeting him in person, but he was on the Contemporary Jewry Editorial Board and, from time to time, contributed to our discussions. I feel for the family, grieving in such private times. May his memory be a blessing for all.

Harriet Hartman

Willy left us much too soon. I was a friend and colleague for four decades. He will be missed; I will miss him. It goes without saying he is in a better place.

Mort Weinfeld

Indeed very sad news both personally and professionally! Willy, as I knew him, was very original, curious, and daring in his research, starting at least as far back as his first book, *The Black Crusaders*, which was a study of black gangs in St. Louis during the late 1960s and early '70s. He went on to write numerous other creative ethnographies.

To the ASSJ community, he will surely be remembered for pioneering work: *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry*, the first major study of higher yeshivas and the world of sectarian/ultra-Orthodox/yeshivish/haredi in the USA, and for his upbeat study of Holocaust survivors who went on to lead very successful lives, *Against All Odds*.

He was, in addition, a very active member in the Jewish community and a very dedicated teacher at CUNY.

Deepest condolences to his wife and children. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

Chaim I Waxman

I am sincerely saddened by the passing of William Helmreich. His work in our field is important and unique, and his affable interaction with colleagues was precious. May his family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. *Yehi Zichro Baruch*.

Harold Himmelfarb

I wish to express my sadness at the passing of our colleague, Willy Helmreich. I did not know him well personally but respected him greatly academically for the challenging areas of research which he undertook. Consequently, I invited him to speak at UConn a number of years ago at a major lecture cosponsored by Judaic studies and African American studies, which was one of the earliest of such events.

His contributions to our field will be greatly missed.

Sincere condolences to his family. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.

Arnold (Arnie) Dashefsky

He did some very important work on Holocaust survivors. I interacted with him about that work and heard him present to professionals working with this population.

Allen (Avi) Glicksman

Willy and I cycled together through CUNY, and we became friends as did our sons, Adam and Jeff. We often compared notes and laughed about how people would confuse us because our last names often blurred in people's memories (Helmreich and Heilman), and we both were sociologists at CUNY who had written about Orthodox Jews. People would come to me to recall having played tennis with me, but of course, it was Willy who played tennis and not me. And they would come to him with some memory of encountering me, and he would have to correct them. Sometimes we both just gave up on correcting people. For a time, he worked at the

Queens College Center for Jewish Studies, and we would meet at the college, and often we met as colleagues at the CUNY Graduate Center. When he and his family suddenly lost their son Alan z'l, he was brave beyond words. We shall all miss him, and my condolences to Henny and his children. May his memory be a blessing.

Samuel Heilman

It's been moving to read the professional accolades and personal memories of William Helmreich, Z"L. Willy Helmreich became our close friend when he, my husband Phil, and I were all graduate students together (albeit in different programs) in Washington University, St. Louis. We stayed in touch when our respective careers took us to different locations. The warmth and mentorship that Sarah writes about was characteristic of Willy. He loved the give and take of human relationships, both with people who seemed similar to himself but equally so with people whose lives were quite different. His original groundbreaking work on the Black Liberators of East St. Louis—which demanded skill and stamina—emerged out of a determination to understand sociological and political change as well as diverse groups of people. Willy had a gift for friendship and an exuberant curiosity about people, ideas, phenomena—and even cities, as his extraordinary project walking every street in NYC illustrated. He loved to hold forth on his latest passions, but as his excellent interview-based sociology books show, he also knew how to listen deeply. Willy was a man of strong family feelings, and he enjoyed sharing his pride in his wife Hennie and his children and their accomplishments. It's really hard to believe that we are now robbed of his unique personality and energy. His memory is already a blessing; may it always be so.

Sylvia Barack Fishman

Bill was a wonderful guy, a warm loving personality as well as a great sociologist. He interviewed my mother Faygeh Porter of Milwaukee for his book on survivors, and I believe he based his book on the Yeshiva on Ner Yisroel in Baltimore that he attended (but I could be mistaken), in which my brother Rabbi Shlomo Porter attended.

What can one say? It is a great shock to our community of scholars and teachers as well as to the general community.

May his memory be a blessing!

Jack Nusan Porter

A lovely half-hour interview featuring William Helmreich courtesy of TV Ontario (2014): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bxs8IT1rkA>.

Bob Brym

Dr. Helmreich was my first mentor in sociology. Years ago, I was exploring what discipline was the best fit for my interests, and I took his class in CUNY on

ethnography. His encouragement and thoughtful mentorship remain strong influences on me. But perhaps more than that, he was an exciting, memorably happy scholar, one who clearly took joy in his craft and in his interactions with the worlds he studied. His stories about walking the streets of New York were compelling, and I know he had so much more to give. He was a deeply warm and kind person, and I am so sorry he is gone. My deepest condolences to his family, his students, and his community.

Matty Lichtenstein

With New York under lockdown, it's almost as if the whole city is sitting Shiva. It is a sad time. We need the liveliness of William Helmreich more than ever now. Fortunately, we have the legacy of his research and his street-by-street portrait of New York in better times.

יהי זכרו ברוך.

Ariela Keysar

Sometime in the mid-80s, William Helmreich spoke at a synagogue here in West Hartford, CT. It was a very entertaining and interesting talk on the subject of Jewish stereotypes and was a memorable window into research quite different from what I was used to (working in the insurance industry). He inspired me to do the far more interesting types of Jewish communal research that members of ASSJ conduct, and I was finally able to pursue this more seriously when I retired. Although we never met face-to-face, I thank him for his memorable enthusiasm! And (as a New Yorker), when pondering the upcoming chag, it occurred to me that his book about walking all of the streets of NYC will be great reading material to occupy myself and spend some time with him.

Mark L. Trencher

When I was in my early 20's and considering whether to pursue a Ph.D. in the sociology of American Jews, I took the subway uptown to CCNY to seek guidance from William Helmreich, an expert in the field who had written books on the sociology of the yeshiva and on Holocaust survivors in America. He was both generous and wise, and the conversation helped convince me to apply to the CUNY Graduate Center.

He was not teaching graduate courses there at the time, and for some reason—lack of awareness of my options, foolishness, time constraints, who knows—I did not think to arrange an independent study with him. I regretted the missed opportunity later. I am feeling those pangs sharply now.

He had diverse interests and is now best known for his work in urban sociology—a multiyear project walking every single block of all of NYC's five boroughs.

Sheltering-at-home, I am walking outside at least once a day. Yesterday, I kept Willy Helmreich z"l in my heart and spoke of him aloud as I walked a new route—streets in my own suburban Nashville neighborhood that I had never walked before. It felt like a fitting tribute.

Yehi zichro baruch.

Shaul Kelner

Shaul, that's a beautiful tribute. I just bought his book about NYC and sent it to my in-laws, who have also lived in NYC their whole lives.

I have been inspired by these stories about William (who I never met) and started photographing different parts of Stanford campus during my evening sanity walks. It's incredibly rare to see Stanford totally empty, and it's giving me a chance to appreciate and document its architectural beauty.

Ilana Hurwitz

Here is the JTA obituary. The New York Times obit should appear tomorrow [March 31, 2020]. Yehe zichro baruch. <https://www.jta.org/2020/03/30/obituaries/william-helmreich-sociologist-of-u-s-jewry-and-inveterate-new-yorker-dies-of-coronavirus>.

Jonathan Sarna

Coronavirus has claimed the life of a great man, William Helmreich, father of Jeff Helmreich (Esty), CUNY sociology professor, and author of many books. I read William's impressive and important ethnography, *The World of the Yeshiva*, in 2001, and I had the opportunity to meet him just 2 months ago, when he was visiting LA. He asked for a copy of my book, *Becoming Frum*, and said he'd send me one of his books on New York in exchange. Two weeks ago, apparently shortly before he got sick, he finished reading my book and sent me a detailed list of comments/observations—with page numbers! I was surprised and honored. I'm sad I won't get the opportunity to engage with him in similar ways about his books or hear his thoughts about my future books. May his memory be for blessing, and may Jeff and Esty and William's whole family find comfort during this tragic time.

Sarah Bunin Benor