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In Memoriam

Robert Vogel

1929-1994

Robert Vogel was born in Vienna in 1929. Ten years later his family escaped to Britain where his father, a First World War veteran of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Air Force, enlisted in the British army. Bob spent his adolescence in Wales and graduated from Cardiff High School. The Vogels emigrated to Canada in 1949 and Bob, who had won a scholarship to Oxford, gained his undergraduate degree at Sir George Williams College. He completed his graduate work at McGill and taught there for more than thirty years. Bob Vogel will best be remembered as an outstanding teacher who inspired students with his carefully constructed, thought-provoking lectures. Bob infused his lectures with compassion and moral purpose. This is part of what he wrote about the end of the war in Europe:

The Second World War was not merely a military contest. It was a war which, from the outset, involved fundamental ideological and political questions.

It is important to remember how it started. During the 1920s and 1930s political philosophies flourished in a number of countries which accepted as part of their world view the need to organize their nations in an authoritarian and totalitarian manner which transformed and exalted nationalism into a racial creed and which rejected all those concepts, from Christianity to Liberalism, which had tried to create world systems (often without success) which would limit conflict, and even abolish war altogether.

During the war, leaders of the Axis Powers fulfilled the darkest aspirations of their ideologies. They had promised that the world would witness the dawn of a new barbarism and they were right. There was indeed a new barbarism which, with modern technology, tortured tens of thousands and exterminated millions for the sake of racial purity which, with old-fashioned cruelty, enslaved millions to work and to starve in the factories and the jungles of occupied territories.

An evil stalked the world in those years from which no one could really escape. The war was about recognition of that evil; the people who fought it understood, perhaps better than we do now, that the ideas of National Socialism, of Japanese Imperialism and Italian Fascism were really only exaggerations of evils which were, and probably are, present in all our ideologies. For the beliefs of the leaders of the Axis Powers were like distorting mirrors that filtered out nearly everything that was good in mankind and enlarged everything that was evil. The war was about recognizing and defeating this evil, not only in the enemy but also in ourselves.

The generation that fought the war instinctively recognized this opportunity and tried not to imitate the evils it had tried so hard to destroy. It did not always succeed, but it probably had a better understanding of the questions than does the current generation. That is why we should remember the victory for what it was and celebrate it as an enormous and successful effort to prevent the domination of the world by the forces of evil. It was a task brought to its successful conclusion by the fighting forces of the Allied Powers amongst whom were a million Canadian volunteers.

What greater tribute can be payed to these Canadian soldiers who returned home in 1945 and who, for the next twenty-five years, provided much of the leadership for Canada, than to remember that they returned home, unsullied by ideas of military power, uninfected by political fanaticism, to build a calmer, more rational and more tolerant Canadian society than any that had previously existed, and to remember that those who did not come home helped to give the world a precious opportunity to reconstitute itself in a more peaceful and tolerant manner.

Bob Vogel was not a war veteran, but he was a child of the 1940s and when he wrote these words about a calmer and more rational and more tolerant Canadian society he was describing his hopes and fears for all of us. Bob was a man of decency, rationality and compassion. His death diminishes us, but his life will continue to offer all who knew him the most valuable gift—hope for our future.