

My Brother, Harold U. Ribalow

By Hadassah Ribalow Nadich

MY BROTHER Uri died twice. The first time on the night of May 9, 1977, in the operating room at New York University Hospital. After many hours of open heart surgery, his heart failed. It was only after two more operations and the desperate efforts of an unusual medical team that he survived. Everybody who was at all involved said it was a miracle that he did. From that day till the day he closed his eyes forever, on October 22, 1982, I always felt that his life was a gift, and each time I heard his voice over the phone, it seemed to me it came from another world, a world he had already partially entered.

Fate was not kind to him. Two years after his heart surgery he was struck down with cancer. He used to say, "Aside from my two fatal diseases, I'm a healthy man." And in a very strange and inexplicable way he was a healthy man. His body had been stricken but his mind and spirit never were. His psychology was never that of a sick person. When he was in intensive care, after his cancer operation, and he was attached to all kinds of tubes and bottles, he said to me, "I'm not going to use my sickness as a crutch, as an excuse for not living. Some people do that, but I won't." And he didn't. He worked, he created, he was in touch with all that went on in the world, he was moved to tears by the sight of other people suffering, he lived, he loved and he left the world with no complaints.

My brother was not a man who expected life to treat him well. He always said that nobody owed him anything. He was undemanding of other people, and demanded much of himself. All his life he was an indefatigable worker and depended on the fruits of his gifted pen to sustain him. A few hours before his death, he spoke to an editor on the phone about a book review he was hoping to write. Already weak and drained, he had the rare gift of separating his spirit from his body and his spirit soared above the stricken body and remained whole.

My brother was born in Russia during the dangerous and uncertain days after the Russian Revolution, on July 1, 1919. His parents, Rose and Menachem, often spoke of the hazards of raising a baby under conditions of war and starvation. His survival during those days

was something of a miracle. He was small for his age and never enjoyed robust health. My parents would always refer to him as a "weak person." How wrong they were! The steely strength he displayed during the last twelve years of his life, when he was plagued by illness, was almost awe inspiring. Never indulging in self-pity, never asking why, he went from crisis to crisis with quiet dignity, never complaining, and never wanting to upset those around him.

When he found out that the cancer had spread and he would require chemotherapy, he wondered how I could be told since he knew of my deep concern and love for him.

We had a very special bond between us all our lives. Brother and sister and raised in the same house, we were very different persons. My life is public-centered, his was private. I always considered myself a believer, and loved the rituals of religion. He was uncomfortable with formal religion. Yet we respected each other for what we were and we never tried to influence each other in our life-styles. We understood each other in a very profound way and could sense each other's feelings without speech.

We spent a great deal of time together during his illnesses. There was always so much to discuss—our children, our parents, literature, Israel and politics. There was a common language we shared, a language learned in childhood and matured in adulthood. Yiddish expressions, family stories, recollections of the visits of Bialik, Tchernichovsky and Schneour in our parents' home, memories of parents who themselves were very special people who instilled values in us that lasted a lifetime—these were unique to us, very unique.

Uri had strong and definite views. He had high standards in literature and wrote only about writers he admired and esteemed. He was a very prolific writer. He wrote quickly and gracefully, with little rewriting, if any. He produced fifteen volumes in spite of earning his livelihood as an editor and public relations man. His interests ranged far and wide. He loved London, the beauties of New England, Bach, country music, sports (he authored "The Jew in American Sports"), his vast stamp collection, and little children who never failed to delight him.

It was in the field of American Jewish fiction that he found his true interest and became the acknowledged expert in the field.

He could be sharp in his comments on writers and people in general, and sometimes a bit caustic. But

Hadassah Ribalow Nadich is a volunteer Jewish educator. Her article "Love After Death" (*Jewish Spectator*, Winter 1980) was widely quoted.

after his heart surgery he changed. He told me that he no longer got emotionally upset over many things that used to bother him. He became more philosophical and mellow.

As he was a very private person, there was a domain he kept only to himself. I often wondered what thoughts were his companions while he was ill. They could not have been happy ones. He had no fear of hospitals and treated his body almost as if it were another creature, not really himself. Perhaps I couldn't penetrate his mind, but of some things I am sure. I know that he had great loves in his life. He was a man of total integrity

and loved honesty. He loved the Jewish people. He loved the land of Israel. He loved the written word. He loved his parents and had a bond with his father that lasted for the 29 years since his death. He loved his wife "whose banner over me is love," as he described her in one of his book dedications. He loved his gifted children and told me once that he never felt he deserved their love automatically, but that he had to earn it, and earn it he did. He adored his grandchildren with great enthusiasm. He loved my family and his love for me is alive and real and will accompany me to the end of my days.