

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION****Peter Paul Jacobi**

1930–2019

Two weeks before Peter Jacobi's death on Christmas Eve, 2019, at age 89, two IU journalism colleagues treated him to lunch. It was on the anniversary of the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, likely prompting Jacobi — a self-described "refugee from Nazi Germany" — to talk about the ominous signs he saw in contemporary American politics. The memories of his native Germany seemed uppermost in his mind.

Peter Paul Jacobi was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1930. His father —Karl August Paul Jacobi —was a hairdresser and stylist for opera and classical music performers. Trouble loomed for his father, an outspoken critic of Hitler. Peter's mother, Liesbeth Kron Jacobi, was Jewish. Inevitably, the family was "blacklisted."

Before *Kristallnacht*, "the night of broken glass," in 1938 — when Peter was eight — the family fled. Jerome Kern, famous American composer, Lorenz Hart, lyricist, and Edna Ferber, Pulitzer Prize winning novelist — likely because of the elder Jacobi's connection to the Berlin arts community — arranged sponsorships for the family to come to America. It was through Ellis Island that their new life began, with settlement in Chicago.

From that new beginning in America's "second city," Peter Jacobi would fashion a distinguished professional life. His storied career, from which he never truly retired, melded unique journalistic talent, a gift for teaching, and a love of music and the arts.

In Germany, Peter had been bullied and beaten by a physical training teacher in school, as told to his son Keith. The Chicago experience would be different. He thrived in public schools, learning English quickly and becoming a U.S. citizen at 14.

At Chicago's Sullivan High School, Jacobi worked on the student newspaper, where he discovered what IU emeritus journalism dean Trevor Brown called his love of the "music of words." That led Jacobi to study at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, where he also wrote for the student paper, *The Daily Northwestern*. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism in 1952 and stayed on for a master's degree awarded in 1953.

After graduate work, Jacobi was drafted into the U.S. Army, serving two years. In late 1955, he returned to Chicago and became a news editor for WGN, the ABC network radio station, and later moved to WMAQ, the NBC-TV affiliate there, also as an editor.

A versatile writer, Peter found the traditional role of public affairs journalist was easy for him, but the lure of the arts was strong. His son Keith remembers, "My father always had music in his head," likely harkening back to his youth in Berlin. He became editor of the *Lyric Opera* (of Chicago) *News* and hosted a weekly radio show, "A World/Evening of Opera," on WBEZ-FM, an educational radio station. At the same time, he was theater critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, important in those days because of the prominence of the Goodman Theater.

While enjoying a stimulating career combining the arts and journalism, Jacobi also was discovering his gifts as a teacher. After returning to Chicago and becoming a broadcast journalist, he began teaching as a professional lecturer at his alma mater, the Medill School at Northwestern. He became one of its most popular lecturers and in 1963 was appointed to a faculty position. He rose to full professor and also was associate dean of the Medill School for a decade. That stellar success at Northwestern would be marked by Jacobi's being in the inaugural class of Medill's Hall of Achievement in 1997.

Jacobi was widely known as a teacher of journalistic writing as “creative nonfiction.” He thought the notions of “style” and the writer’s “voice” were applicable to all of journalism. And he rose to national prominence when he became vice president for instruction in 1981 at Jack Hilton Inc., a large New York City communication consultancy. There he taught workshops in multi-media writing throughout the country and consulted with a variety of clients — including state governors and other political and business leaders — on how to present themselves in media.

It was at Indiana University, however, that Jacobi’s immense love of music and the arts would be fully harnessed to his extraordinary gifts as a teacher of journalistic writing for all media. Joining IU’s School of Journalism as full professor in 1985 —at a time when the program was recognized as one of the most innovative in the country — Jacobi knew the world-class IU School of Music would be the creative engine for the final chapter of his journalistic and teaching life. He was truly “home.”

At IU journalism, Jacobi created courses on reporting the arts and burnished his longstanding reputation as a great teacher. He was a “star” on the faculty of the Gannett Foundation-supported national workshop for beginning journalism teachers held each summer at IU Bloomington. And, of course, he plunged enthusiastically into the thriving music and arts culture of the IU campus, Bloomington and the state. He was appointed to the Indiana Arts Commission and later became its chair.

Jacobi began writing for Bloomington’s *The Herald-Times* during his first semester at IU, with then-editor Bob Zaltsberg celebrating the newspaper’s good fortune at having a classical music reviewer “of Peter’s quality and drive.” Over the years, he wrote hundreds of reviews of campus and community musical performances. And for many regular attenders of those events, seeing Jacobi seated in his favorite locations at the Musical Arts Center, Auer Hall or Ford-Crawford Hall meant the concert could commence. For those close enough to catch a glimpse, watching Peter make cryptic notes on the event programs —no reporter’s notebook for him — was a ritual. Those program notes and his enormous powers of concentration always produced enriching insights for the thousands of readers of his reviews. Janis Starcs, MaryAlice Cox and Trevor Brown were some of them.

Starcs, longtime proprietor of Bloomington’s Caveat Emptor bookshop and Jacobi’s friend, often sat next to him at events. He wrote that Peter’s reviews “...were tactful and generous, especially of the many student performers....” Cox, Friends of Music board president who also sat near Jacobi at performances, wrote, “His columns were always informative and he was a tireless supporter of students.” Brown, emeritus IU journalism dean, said Jacobi’s “... sensitivity to his role in preparing student journalists and musicians for public performance distinguished” both his teaching and criticism. Brown added, “He held these apprentices to the highest professional standards with a gentle, inspiring touch.”

Jacobi’s published reviews and large presence in the music and arts life of the university made him a one-person institution. The Society of the Friends of Music of the IU Jacobs School recently established the Peter Jacobi Scholarship for music students, honoring Jacobi’s “exceptional character and lifelong passion for the arts...[and his] masterful ability to inform and inspire audiences through his columns.”

He officially retired from IU in 1999. The retirement celebration that summer was at Woodburn House, the perfect place to honor Jacobi. The extraordinary IU President Herman B Wells — whom Peter greatly admired — had lived there. And in the 1940s, Wells entertained the cast of the Metropolitan Opera at Woodburn House when they came to perform *Aida* in the IU Auditorium. For Jacobi — and for the many IU music and journalism faculty, friends and family honoring him—it was almost as if the voices of Wells and the Met performers still lingered.

For sure, Jacobi would linger at IU. He continued to write reviews and columns for 20 years and taught arts reporting classes for another decade and a half. In 2009 he taught a graduate class in which Jenny Porter Tilley

was a student. She remembers Jacobi as an inspiring mentor who taught her how to put “joy” into her writing. Her assignments usually got A’s but were “bleeding with red marks” and suggestions about making them better. Later, after getting a master’s degree, she became arts editor at *The Herald-Times* with the honor of editing her former professor’s articles. Although still “feeling like his student,” Tilley said she did “obsessively” eliminate his Oxford commas.

The last Jacobi column, minus those “Oxford commas,” was on December 15, 2019, a preview of the Bloomington Chamber Singers’ annual sing-along of Handel’s “Messiah.” It had a significance that only Jacobi could have known. He had published several successful books, but was proudest of his 1982 work published by St. Martin’s Press: *The Messiah Book: The Life and Times of G.F. Handel’s Greatest Hit*. It is still influential and consulted by conductors and performers of Handel’s masterpiece.

As the luncheon group left the restaurant that crisp, early-December day in 2019 after a now-treasured conversation with Peter Jacobi, none of us thought it would be our last. Playing loudly on the restaurant’s doorway sound system was Bloomington-born Bobby Helms’s country classic, “Jingle Bell Rock.” Jokingly, one of us said, “Peter, they’re playing that just for you!” Enjoying the tease, he smiled and said, “Yes, I’m sure.”

One of Peter’s favorite songs was “Va pensiero,” Giuseppe Verdi’s choral anthem imagining the voices of the Hebrews in captivity in his popular opera, *Nabucco*. On several important occasions, Jacobi quoted from its first verse, “Fly, my thoughts on wings of gold” —most notably in a eulogy to his wife, author and journalist Hattie Ackley Jacobi Clark, who died a few months before Peter. She and Peter had worked together on *The Daily Northwestern* and graduated from the Medill School the same year, 1952. And Peter might well have chosen “Va pensiero” for his own epitaph. After all, the thousands of his columns and writings about the university community’s rich life of the performing arts are now preserved in the IU Archives, with Peter’s thoughts still “flying on golden wings.”

Peter Jacobi, no doubt, would say he should not be placed in the pantheon of IU legends Menahem Pressler, pianist, and Janos Starker, cellist, but he belongs. They, too, were refugees from the Nazis, who — like Jacobi — played a huge role in deepening the richness and reputation of Indiana University.

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