

Henry Herman Plotkin

May 6, 1927 – January 9, 2025

Henry Plotkin was a musician, a scientist, a husband, a father, a grandfather, and a great-grandfather. He did all of those things with extraordinary grace, depth, and love.

Henry was born in New York City in 1927 to immigrants from the Minsk region of what is now Belarus. His first language was Yiddish. As a boy in the Bronx he would pen the letters that his mother dictated, to send back to her mother and aunts in the shtetl of Luna – until, after one of the Czarist pogroms, there was nobody left to receive them. His Yiddish faded as his schooling brought him into the American mainstream.

Henry's father heard Kol Nidre played on the cello and wanted one of his sons to play that for him. Since there were no cellos or cello teachers in the area, he sent my father downstairs to "Mr. Fiddlesticks" for violin lessons. Henry spent his childhood and youth playing the violin, and he credits the dedication that his musical education required with teaching him to prioritize the important things in life. He went to the High School of Music and Art in New York, where he was concertmaster of the senior orchestra.

When he enrolled at CCNY, which offered free education to one and all, Henry had to decide between music and his other interest, science. He chose Physics as his major, leading the way to a career as a scientist. As a result, his life as an amateur violinist at the highest level was unsullied by the pressures of professionalism. He graduated from CCNY in 1946, at age 19, and received a master's degree in Physics from NYU when he was 21. He received his Ph.D. from MIT in 1957.

Henry was drafted during the Korean War, and served in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1956. After boot camp, he was assigned to a research position at the Signal Corps, where he continued working after his honorable discharge. In 1959 he moved to NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center as head of the Optical Systems Branch. He retired from NASA in 1994 as Goddard's Assistant Director of Engineering for Development Projects.

Henry was a pioneer in using lasers to track satellites. The crowning achievement of his career was the placement of mirror arrays on the moon by three Apollo moon missions. These arrays, developed by Henry, are used to accurately measure the distance to the moon, to understand its orbit, its composition, and its relationship with Earth. They remain on the moon today and continue to be used by research scientists around the world.

After his retirement he had a remarkable second career at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County as a professor and science administrator, responsible for creating not one but two UMBC research centers. He also volunteered as a visiting scientist in the Montgomery County Public Schools, where he offered the kind of creative science teaching to third and fourth graders that he had used to inspire his own children's intellectual curiosity.

In 1953, Henry married Billie Helpert, who was working with MIT aeronautics researchers as a "computer." They met when Henry was supplementing his graduate school stipend by fiddling for square dances in Boston. Finding Billie is the most important of the many blessings that Henry attributes to his violin.

Henry's children, Marty and Helen, grew up in a house filled with chamber music. Wherever Henry went he sparked community through music. His social world was built around musical evenings – music for its own sake. He was also a member of several local orchestras.

Billie was a lover of the outdoors, and she taught Henry the joys of camping. The vacations of Marty and Helen's childhood consisted of camping trips to Assateague Island or Western Maryland, to the coast of Maine or the Rangeley Lakes. As empty-nesters, Henry and Billie made many camping trips to Rangeley Lake State Park, and in 1993 they bought a cabin on neighboring Lake Mooselookmeguntic. This cabin

became a place for the family to gather. It was the basis of an intimacy between grandparents and grandchildren that is unusual in the contemporary world. The Rangeley area provided another uplifting community of friends and neighbors who were woven into Henry's life.

Henry never relearned his Yiddish, but in the last quarter of his life he and Billie found their way back to Judaism through their children. They joined Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, MD, which became a spiritual home and supportive community for more than 25 years. The level of learning, musicality, and friendship they found there would have been a source of wonder for their Jewish ancestors.

Henry and Billie's four grandchildren, Ben, Sarah, Miriam, and Anna, grew up with a vision of how life is to be lived that is modeled on their grandparents: A life of family, strong marriage, artistic and intellectual expression, love of the outdoors, and building good in the world.

Henry lived to know his first three great-grandchildren, Eve, Ada, and Fay. They brought him light of unmeasurable brightness in his final years.

Henry is survived by his children Marty Plotkin (Pam Swing) and Helen Plotkin (Richard Schuldenfrei); his grandchildren Ben Plotkin-Swing (Hannah Hamavid), Sarah Schuldenfrei (Matt Donaldson), Miriam Schuldenfrei (Manse Jennings), and Anna Plotkin-Swing (Kasey Leslie); and his great-granddaughters Eve Plotkin, Ada Plotkin, and Fay Donaldson.

Charitable contributions in Henry's memory may be made to these organizations:

- Mekom Torah (<http://mekomtorah.org/contribute>)
- Music Center at Strathmore (<http://strathmore.org/join-give>).

Zichrono livracha – his memory is a blessing.



1937



1963

Notes of condolences can be sent to his daughter Helen Plotkin (helen@mekomtorah.org).