

Mark Hirshberg

[JP jpuupdates.com/2016/09/29/discussion-in-manhattan-shines-spotlight-on-life-and-work-of-studs-terkel/](http://jpuupdates.com/2016/09/29/discussion-in-manhattan-shines-spotlight-on-life-and-work-of-studs-terkel/)

On Wednesday night, Professor Alan Wieder discussed his book, *Studs Terkel: Politics, Culture but Mostly Conversation*, focusing on the life and work of American-Jewish historian Studs Terkel (May 16, 1912 – October 31, 2008). A renowned author, historian, and broadcaster, Terkel received the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction for *The Good War*, an oral history of World War II. The Manhattan event at which Wieder spoke was co-hosted by the Workmen's Circle, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Brooklyn Institute.

An oral historian who lives in Portland, Oregon, Wieder is a distinguished professor emeritus at the University of South Carolina, and has published three books and articles focusing on South Africans who fought against apartheid. His book *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* was published in 2013.

Wieder's Wednesday night address was preceded by remarks from Ann Toback, the Workmen's Circle's Executive Director. Toback noted that the 116-year-old non-profit organization, founded by workers in 1900, remains committed to "making the world a better place," "fighting for worker's rights," and what it means to be "a progressive Jew." On its website, the organization says it "work[s] fiercely to remain a bulwark in the fight for the dignity and economic rights of immigrants, fairness in labor practices, decent health care for all Americans, in short, for the very promises that brought our organization's founders to this nation in the first place."

Jeff Gold, a representative of the Democratic Socialists of America who met Terkel personally, said he captured the "authentic voices" of workers, and painted a picture of their personalities and lives.

Victor Navasky, a journalist, author, former editor and publisher of *The Nation*, also shared reminiscences of Terkel, whom he knew as well. Navasky noted that when meeting Terkel for the first time, he was impressed to find that the esteemed historian had "mastered" Navasky's book on Margaret Kennedy, taking copious notes and pointing out discrepancies in the text. Navasky observed that this was in stark contrast to many others who had interviewed him about his book without bothering to actually read it. According to Navasky, Terkel "made you feel good" as an author, due to his care and concern for your work.

Navasky was followed by Wieder, who said he too was deeply inspired by Terkel, who began writing his oral histories when Wieder was a doctoral student in the '70s. Wieder noted that at the time, oral history, which is the study and collection of historical information about individuals and major events through transcriptions of interviews, videotapes, and audiotapes, "was not an honored field" and "wasn't seen as valued research" by some. That said, Wieder noted that the doctoral committee "loved Terkel," and that his own doctoral thesis focused on Jewish immigrants in Cleveland.

"I think this book is a collage of Studs Terkel's life," Wieder said, adding that it was "a book that I had to do," and one that was "a joy to write." He then outlined three aspects of his biography which he believes other studies of Terkel's life and work have not yet covered.

The first, according to Wieder, was the fact that his book "provides [a] critical mass of Studs stories." Wieder noted that when it came to Studs, "everybody had a story," to the point that there were simply too many to incorporate into the book. Wieder recalled an interview Terkel conducted with a young girl as part of "Joy Steet," a documentary he produced in the 1960s about Chicago's teenagers. When asked by Terkel about what she wanted to be when she grew up, the girl responded, "How do I know I'll grow up? My life wasn't promised to me." Wieder noted that Studs was "engaging," and made you feel that he genuinely cared.

The second unique aspect of his biography, Wieder said, is its focus on Terkel's "lifelong commitment to fighting and documenting white supremacy." Wieder noted that Terkel's African-American friends, including gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, educated him about the challenges faced by black people in America in the 1950s and '60s. Terkel went on

to cover apartheid in South Africa, interviewing both black and white citizens of the country, and participated in and covered the 1963 March on Washington. Wieder went so far as to say that Terkel was “psychologically and philosophically black.” During his meeting with Terkel in 2003, when Terkel was 91, Wieder said he and Terkel connected over Wieder’s visit to South Africa, and their shared interest in the historic fight against apartheid.

Wieder said that the third innovation of his biography was its focus on Terkel’s “definition of conversation.” Describing Terkel as “the world’s greatest listener,” Wieder said that despite his normally talkative nature, when it came to interviews, Terkel made sure to always let his subjects do the talking. Wieder added that through his work, Terkel “provided [a] microphone for the voiceless,” and modeled “a way of being in the world.”

Wieder touched on Terkel’s blacklisting during the McCarthy era, though he himself was not called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Wieder said Terkel’s commitment to the Communist party was ambiguous, and joked that Terkel was not the type to enjoy sitting through meetings. He also quoted Terkel as saying that he “never [got] a petition I didn’t sign.” Wieder noted that Terkel’s appeal to many people was that he was not an ideologue.

Terkel’s connection to his Jewish heritage was briefly discussed by Wieder as well. The professor noted that Terkel’s mother attended synagogue daily, while his father did not at all. Wieder noted that Terkel’s parents wanted his oldest brother to be a rabbi. Ultimately, Wieder said, Terkel was “less interested in [Judaism] than Bernie Sanders.”

Wieder’s discussion of Terkel’s work and life painted a portrait of a complex, likable man with a razor sharp wit and a deep fascination with history and human stories. Terkel’s motivation to document and combat injustice in all its manifestations was incidentally a deeply Jewish value.

“I hope for peace and sanity,” Terkel once said, “it’s the same thing.” Terkel also said that he “Hopes that memory is valued – that we do not lose memory.” Thanks to his own work, and the efforts of historians like Professor Wieder, the memory of Studs Terkel will surely endure for generations to come.

Copyright © 2016 JPUupdates.com



Former editor/publisher of The Nation Victor Navasky speaks at discussion of Studs Terkel's life

