Rabbi William (Willy) Wolff, Ze'ev ben Avraham v'Leah

(13 February 1927–8 July 2020)

Funeral Address by Rabbi Professor Tony Bayfield

‘Words have always played a great part in my professional life’, wrote Willy,¹ just four years ago. ‘In the first place when I was a journalist for the *English Daily Press*, then later and now as a rabbi. But I have always refused to write anything autobiographical. There is a limit to the interest I have in myself.’

The emphasis on words places Willy within the classical Rabbinic tradition; the silence about his background identifies him as a survivor. My puzzling failure to recognise Willy as a survivor – despite knowing him for forty years and working with him so closely on our quarterly journal *MANNA* – says a lot about my lack of sensitivity. But it also says something not just about the way Willy chose to present himself but how he saw himself.

Willy Wolff was born into a middle-class Berlin Jewish family on 13 February 1927. He’d been preceded two years earlier by his sister Ruth and was followed minutes later by his twin brother Jo. His mother Charlotte adored him and Willy reciprocated that love and cared for her throughout her long and difficult life. His father, who was well into his forties when Willy was born, was not much interested in his children and remained, for Willy, a distant, troubled and troubling figure.

Alfred Wolff was an observant Orthodox Jew, a member of the Adass Yisrael community in Lessing Street, Berlin which had boasted Einstein and the liturgist Elbogen as members. Alfred was responsible for Willy’s early experience of synagogue and it clearly rubbed off, since, from an early age, he had thoughts of pursuing the rabbinate as a career – despite his mother’s life-long hostility to religion.

Charlotte Wolff was a regular customer of a Mrs Friedlander, a seamstress. And Mrs Friedlander had a daughter called Magda who was married to a young politician by the name of Joseph Goebbels. When the

Figure 1 Rabbi William (Willy) Wolff. © Manuela Koska.

Nazis were – democratically – elected in 1933, Mrs Wolff was concerned that the connection with Mrs Friedlander might bring the Wolff family to ‘early attention’. So, on 27 September 1933, she, Alfred and the three children took the night train to Amsterdam.

The family liked Amsterdam – all, that is, except Alfred who was unable to cope with the new environment, had a nervous breakdown and then left for England where he knew he could get work in the medical rubber industry. However, it was Alfred, to his great credit, who phoned in August 1939 and told his wife and children to come to London immediately. He settled them in Shirehall Avenue in Hendon – even then an

orthodox enclave. I remember the house and the dark, heavy furniture and the – by then – severely disabled, but smiling, Mrs Wolff.

The war years were pivotal for Willy. First, they saw the final collapse of his parents' marriage; his father died during an attempt to force-feed him in Shenley in 1946. Second, for Willy's feelings of displacement and loneliness, which were intense and profound. And third, for working harder than anyone else except, perhaps, his twin brother at Hendon County Grammar School.

Willy also resumed synagogue attendance, in the new and splendid building of Hendon United Synagogue, where the cantor was a young David Koussevitzky. Willy observed that the singing at Raleigh Close was far better than the sermons – which was not true of Willy. But it underlines part of the appeal of the synagogue and the rabbinate for him – it was the ritual, the solemn ceremony. Willy approved of the top hats at West London Synagogue more even than members born into the congregation.

Willy enrolled at the London School of Economics, choosing International Relations and Economics, but after little more than a term was struck down by severe illness, which lasted for three years and almost killed him. His recovery only began with the chance recommendation of a homeopath to give up eating meat, which brought about a notable improvement, but his inability to cope with dairy produce took longer to identify.

I kick myself again when I think how lightly I dismissed what I took to be his dietary idiosyncrasies. My children remember my wife Linda *angsting* about how she could feed this little, gaunt man when all he would eat was boiled fish, plain pasta, melon and bananas. We never realised it was a matter of life and death.

Aged sixteen, Willy received career advice, toyed with the choice it highlighted – journalism or the rabbinate – and journalism came out on top. He would talk to me about walking from Hendon to High Barnet during the war to work at Reuters Radio Listening Centre, and later embarked on a highly successful journalistic career at *The Mirror*, becoming their senior political correspondent.² It enabled him to live the life he wanted. A choice he made in 1957 is truly revealing. Willy decided that as well as living with his mother in Hendon, he wanted a home in the country. He came across a plan to build four bungalows in a village a couple of miles outside Henley on Thames. He went to look at the site and bought Little Paddock off plan – 'the end house with a view across fields and meadows'. Despite his punctilious English – so reminiscent of dear Rabbi John Rayner z'l – and the faint but always discernible Berlin accent, Willy had opted to be an English gentleman. He admitted to two

‘pleasures’ – illicit as far as a German Jewish survivor is concerned. The first, Christmas Eve at the Royal Church at Windsor; and the second in morning suit and top hat in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot – and the occasional flutter. Willy also saw these treats as compensation for the wife and family he longed for but never had.

He really loved his journalistic career, travelling with the Foreign Secretary of the day, patiently building relationships of trust which often endured beyond the political career. He had a close relationship with Harold Wilson, once legging it with Wilson from an over-attentive crowd, and claimed responsibility for the establishment of the higher degree of personal security senior politicians now enjoy. He was a great admirer of David Owen but ambivalent about Margaret Thatcher whose lack of a concept of Europe and of Britain’s relationship with Europe is crucial to Willy’s understanding of what was even more indispensable to his self-identity than his Britishness. Ironically, his career at *The Mirror* ended when a new editor sought to popularise the paper and downgrade its serious political content in favour of scandal. Willy was made European editor, which was a demotion he chose not to accept.

Willy always maintained his journalistic career, working as gossip columnist for *The Mail*, for the *Evening Standard* and later as a correspondent for a Scottish Sunday. He also wrote many obituaries for the *Times*, including Linda’s, for which my gratitude was boundless. But the establishment of the Leo Baeck College allowed him to express his Judaism without what he describes as the fundamentalism of orthodoxy and its inability to express the essence of Judaism, which he regarded as responding to the needs of Jews. He never understood his sister Ruth’s decision to marry an ultra-Orthodox Jew and move to Gateshead, though he did retain loving connections with several nephews and a great niece. He saw Ruth’s decision as a retreat from life. That’s something Willy never did. Indeed, he had to absorb Ruth’s tragic, premature death in a car crash when driving back from visiting him, and his twin brother Jo’s suicide in Perth, Australia where Jo had – from early on – pursued an academic career as a German Studies lecturer.

During his five years at the Leo Baeck College from 1979 to 1984, Willy, still under the influence of Cantor Koussevitzky, decided to take private singing lessons with a retired opera singer who told him, ‘Your voice is not impressive but we can try to develop it’. But after several years, the teacher said, ‘You know Mr Wolff, what I appreciate in you is you are completely consistent. You make the same mistakes again and again’. Can’t you hear Willy laughing? I have an indelible memory of Linda and me going with Willy to the theatre to see a rather risqué play called ‘Steaming’. We weren’t sure how people would react if they knew

we'd been to the play, but Willy's distinctive guffaw echoing round the theatre dismissed all pretence of anonymity.

On graduating from Leo Baeck College, Willy went to work with Rabbi Hugo Gryn at West London Synagogue – the synagogue where his heart was. It offered him scope for the ceremony he loved and incomparable opportunity for meeting, talking to and caring for Jews from all walks of life, which was the heart of his rabbinate. This was followed by spells in Newcastle, Milton Keynes, Reading, Brighton and Wimbledon, and led, eventually, to the final turning point in his life.

While in Newcastle, Willy also took charge of the small community in Darlington. It was a Friday in November 1989 and he was driving to Darlington to take the Erev Shabbat service. He listened to a broadcast on the car radio about the fall of the Berlin Wall and found he had tears in his eyes. As he wrote: 'That is how I realised that the fate of Germany could still move me'. In terms of the great unifier, he identified with Bismarck rather than Helmut Kohl!

Willy moved to Wimbledon Synagogue, to which he made a considerable contribution, including solving the synagogue's finances by letting their parking facilities to patrons of the Wimbledon tennis tournament. There was no balancing expenditure since Willy acted as car park attendant. However, he eventually encountered a Chairman whom Willy understood as asking him to consider eventual retirement. I have uncomfortable memories of my behaviour at that point.

From 1983, for nearly twenty-eight years, Willy and I produced a quarterly journal, *MANNA*. I was nominally the editor and Willy the deputy editor, but Willy went through all the copy after I'd finished with it, heavily editing it without fear or favour, adding newspaper headlines and arranging the material in order – the most favoured by Willy first and the least favoured by Willy last. The topics and contributors were largely down to me; all the rest was Willy's work. And he also contributed what we called 'The Last Word', a single page commenting on British Jewry as he saw it. Thanks to Willy's friend and saviour James Leek z'l from Wimbledon, all 110 issues of *MANNA*, including nearly one hundred 'Last Words', are available online.

I'd known Willy for decades, worked with him and loved him. Yet when he was told by Wimbledon, not for the first time in his career, that it might soon be time to move on, all I did as Head of the Reform Movement at the time was to discuss that news neutrally with Willy and point to his age.

As always, Willy took perceived rejection in his stride, phoned his old hometown, Berlin and told them that he was ready to come to work in Germany. In 2002, at the age of seventy-five, this frail-in-physique but

steely-in-mind survivor took up the post of Chief Rabbi of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania with responsibility for the communities of Schwerin, Rostock and Wismar. All three were Russian immigrant communities without roots or traditions, populated exclusively by recent Russian and Ukrainian émigrés with no experience of Judaism. Yet Willy, with no Russian but an abundance of care, compassion and the burning desire to serve Jews, gave them life, sustained them and brought them to the point where he could hand them on – albeit reluctantly – to a rabbi with Russian roots and language. At last, at long, long last, Willy received recognition for who he truly was. He was deeply respected by members of both the State and Federal governments and was made an Honorary Citizen of Schwerin.

Four years ago, an award-winning German filmmaker Britta Wauer made a highly accomplished and acclaimed ninety-minute documentary about his life, finally subverting Willy's 'limit to the interest I have in myself'. He became an instant celebrity – with a Wikipedia page in German!

But all the time he'd been in Mecklenburg, come snow or ice, Willy would return to Little Paddock, the bungalow he bought off-plan near Henley. To the unsympathetic eye it was a strange little place filled with rough, booklined shelves and papers (Willy always said that the only thing he shared with his father was untidiness). But to Willy it was always home, overlooking the fields and meadows of England.

Despite growing infirmity, Willy continued to pop up everywhere, and despite failing eyesight – the cruellest of blows for a man whose life was the written word – he continued to drive his car (he had a passion for driving) with terrifying results. It was only at the very end, forced out of his beloved bungalow by a freak storm and confined to a care home in Henley, that the displacement and loneliness of the past resurfaced. It was compounded by the sudden death of his great supporter James Leek. But thanks to the loving care of Alex – Rabbi Alexandra Wright was caring beyond all measure – Gaby, Gilly, Mavis and Meyer, Sarah and other loyal family and friends, Willy remained a survivor of all that life could throw at him. I can still hear that distinctive laugh while we discussed the absurdity, the Cummings and goings and petty scandals of so much of our political leadership during Coronavirus. And then Willy saying, 'Thank you so much for phoning. It's been such a treat'.

Willy: it was such a treat for all of us to know you.

Baroness Rabbi Julia Neuberger

I absolutely adored Willy. We were colleagues, but that's not why I adored him so. It was that, after my father's death, he took it upon himself to

act as if he was my father, at least part of the time. Why? Well, when his family left Germany in 1933 and then went to Holland, they met some of my family there, who had also left Germany – Frankfurt in their case – for safety in Holland, and through them got in touch – I think; we were never absolutely sure about this (perhaps via Willy’s father already in London) – with my grandmother who chaired the welfare committee of the Refugee Committee in London. She helped them. In 1939, Willy’s family arrived in the UK. And I don’t think he saw my grandmother again. But when my father was very sick in the 1990s, Willy would make a point of going to see him and cherishing him, as his rabbi at West London briefly, but really in memory of a family connection. And when my father died, Willy conducted one night of prayers at my mother’s request, because Willy had been such a *mensch* to my father. And, as Tony reminded us about Willy’s superb tribute to Linda in his obituary for *The Times*, he also wrote my father’s obituary in *The Times*. My father would have loved that.

That was 1996. For the next twenty-plus years, Willy – wherever he was – would look after me. Like a father, although often a distant one. When I became a Dame, Willy sent me a necklace because that’s what my father would have wanted him to do. When I spoke at the first ordination of rabbis post-war in Dresden, in Germany, Willy translated my speech into German for me. When I took German citizenship recently, Willy was the first to congratulate me. When I went to Germany to be with him, he looked after me like a princess (my father would not have done that!). And when he had his 90th birthday, we sat with him and celebrated him – this man who had done so much, who had shown so many people so much love, who had shone a light on a German Jewish future as well as a German Jewish past, and a German Jewish past he did not see as being entirely tragic, though terrible in the Nazi years. Others – who had not lived through the Nazi years, who had not had to leave, who had not been refugees twice over – were often unsympathetic to his view. But Willy would calmly discuss the great triumphs of German Jewry, its talents, its successes, the German Jewish Nobel prize winners, the German Jewish liturgy and liturgical music, the achievements, the brilliance, the sense of belonging. And he would rest his case.

I want to talk about his capacity to inspire love. The huge gathering in Schwerin on Friday night shows that. Respect, of course, but also love. The obituaries pouring in. The emails and letters. But also the memories. Feeding him was a nightmare till you learned just to give him boiled potatoes. Walking through Berlin with him was hard because I, twenty-three years younger, couldn’t keep pace with him as he shot along the streets, stopping only to explain something or to show me something from his childhood. His long friendship with Leo

Hepner was filled with jokes and love and memories that went back decades. You couldn't interrupt when they were together. His ability to inspire devotion was extraordinary, and I do want to pay tribute to everyone who looked after him and was so kind to him, but particularly to Gilly Wiscarson who has been such a friend and support – and who cannot be with us this evening – to Sarah Thompson, and of course to Rabbi Alex herself, who has been beyond amazing. Jewish, non-Jewish, British, German, Russian, Dutch, Israeli . . . whoever, whatever, Willy reached out. He was the subject of a documentary. When Britta Wauer made an earlier documentary about the Weissensee cemetery, it was Willy who shone out, wisdom, sadness, joy and a sense of a future. He became a hero in Germany, almost a folk legend, and his own documentary, *A Gentleman before God*, is an astonishing story of a remarkable man. Sigmunt Koenigsberg, who is Berlin's antisemitism commissioner, described him as 'a ray of hope in this world'. I think he was – and is – more. His life was astonishing, but his legacy is to have helped rebuild a Jewish community in Germany, remaining respected and loved by all shades of opinion. His legacy will live on, not only in his work, but his gift of love, which all of us here mourning him will in some way have shared. A true *mensch*. A heart of gold. A brilliant brain. But above all someone who touched everyone he came into contact with. They, WE, will never be the same again.

Rabbi Alexandra Wright Eulogy

On one of the last occasions I saw Willy at Acacia Lodge, he was very weak, but still alert, wanting to know what was going on in the world and if Boris Johnson was still the Prime Minister (the worst Prime Minister we've ever had since Lord North, he said). We chatted for a while and then I suggested that he try to sleep. His eyesight had become very poor, but he looked at me with that characteristic mischievous twinkle in his eye and a slow grin spread across his face as he said, 'It's all right. I have a long sleep ahead of me'.

It is that wide smile, the self-deprecating, infectious laugh and sense of humour that we will remember most about Willy. But also that sense of occasion, the way that he would walk up to the *bimah*, a small frame standing behind the lectern, robed in his *tallit* to pronounce the priestly blessing in a powerful and strong voice, full of authority and warmth. He was gracious, warm, thoughtful, modest, acutely intelligent, a superb linguist, abstemious in his own habits, but generous towards others, to a fault. He was compassionate and understanding and rarely judgemental.

He had what his German friends called '*Lebenskraft*' – *er war ein kleiner Mann*, they said, but he was full of vitality.

Most important, he was a people person; he had that unique capacity to make you feel special – that you were a significant and precious part of his life. And each one of you here today, and many who aren't, were precious to him, as he was to you. He had an immense capacity for true friendship, and he served each one of the communities where he was a Rabbi with loyalty, and with a sense of vocation, commitment and love.

It was in Germany that he found true recognition of his role as Chief Rabbi of the north-eastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, not only because of his devotion to its Jewish population, 99 per cent of whom had come from the former Soviet Union, but because of his relentless commitment to reconciliation and healing. Even after his retirement, which left him bereft of purpose, he rarely missed an anniversary or event, returning to Germany to stand beside Christian ministers to recite prayers at the site of a concentration camp or on the anniversary of the November Pogrom.

The day he was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit by the Prime Minister in Schwerin for this work was a very proud one for him. 'I may not have done very much with my life', he said from time to time, 'but I hope I will be remembered for the work of reconciliation I did in Germany'. I hope he knew just how many people held him in such high regard and with such immense affection for all that he had undertaken in his life, not least this return to Germany and the work he did there.

He voiced himself the fragmentation of his own childhood, moving from Berlin to Amsterdam and then to London, the brokenness of being the child of a failed marriage, as he put it. Travelling between these three places in his mid-seventies and eighties, he said, was a way of trying to bring the fragments of his life together.

When I saw him on Wednesday, just hours after he died, the Willy we had all known had gone and I wondered where had his soul gone?

Harold Kushner, the prominent American rabbi and author offers this comforting response: '... if a man was a good person and people loved him, even after his body has died and been buried, people will still remember him. They will talk about him and be slightly different people because of what he meant to them. And if they remember him and act differently because of it, maybe that is the answer to where his soul went' (Harold S. Kushner, quoted in *A Jewish Book of Comfort*, edited by Charles Middleburgh and Andrew Goldstein).

I speak for all of us in saying that each of us are slightly different people because of the ties that bound us to Willy. He gave so much of himself selflessly, thoughtfully, with such care and love. But I know

that Willy, who never failed to express his gratitude, would also want to acknowledge that so many of you online this evening, not forgetting those who are no longer with us, loved and cared for Willy over many years. You were all an important part of his life. He was full of gratitude for the love and care that was shown to him until the very end of his life. You gave his life not only purpose and meaning, but also enjoyment and fun – the things that were always important to him.

His presence is still with us – his loyalty and laughter, his wisdom and wit, his honesty and humility. May it always remain with us and may the memories of this righteous and upright man endure always as a blessing. *Zecher tzaddik livrachah*. Amen.

Obituary of a Friend – Manuela Koska

I met William Wolff in the spring of 2009 while working on a photo reportage in Schwerin. He happened to run past me, crossed my path, turned around again and smiled. That smile, its radiance, his way, were special. For me as a photographer, his face held a deep fascination (photographically and artistically he was an absolute highlight). Since we did not know each other, I looked up who this stranger was and then set about understanding today's Judaism, synagogues and rabbis. Later, William Wolff agreed to a meeting with me, a photo shoot for a reportage, conversations and further meetings. A special relationship arose from these get-togethers. We then travelled for many years to special Jewish places in Europe and to Israel, and I was allowed to accompany him with my camera. Over ten years I collected photographic moments, portraits and texts, quotations, monthly letters, sermons and 'wise sayings'. At that time I gained a very special story behind the man William Wolff, which was not limited to Judaism alone. It was indeed a journey far into the wondrous world of human existence. Willy Wolff talked about God, where one can seek and find him, about the beauty of God, about hope, confidence, about optimism and always filled with the joy of life. He showed me how human dignity works, whether you are 'infant or aged'.

Once an important delegation came to Schwerin; a lot of well-known public figures met in his office to discuss important things. Half the street was cordoned off, a police presence secured the houses, and bodyguards with radios stood around in the corridors. Willy Wolff did not stay in his office, even though he was one of the main persons at the meeting, but talked with these personal protectors in the dark hallway, because no one else looked after them or even noticed them; they were forgotten, so to

speak, in the turmoil and confusion of this event. He himself made coffee and brought them the cups where they were standing. The event in the office passed almost completely without Rabbi Wolff.

I remember another encounter in the summer of 2010 on the bus from Auschwitz to Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was very hot; the bus was overcrowded with people of different nationalities. The mood there was very difficult, melancholy, sad, upsetting and seemingly helpless. Rabbi Wolff stood in the middle of the overcrowded bus and held onto a strap during the driving. He was by far the oldest person on this bus and possibly the only rabbi. People noticed this. Several approached him, offered him their seat. Despite the grief on the bus and the heat, he told people in four different languages that he preferred to stand. He may look old, but his legs are young! With his way of talking he gave people courage and confidence, and, I would say, even strength to continue on this journey, as well as: 'We can do this too, we are not alone, we are more than sorrow and hopelessness'. His manner, his tangible actual presence, his distinctly palpable kindness and love were stronger here than any intruding helplessness.

When we two stood in front of the former concentration camp in Ravensbrück in September 2009, we also saw the park right next to it. The rain disappeared, the sun came out and showed all the beauty of this park. He stood there for a long time, saw it and said after a long pause: 'What a beautiful place'.

Our family, my husband Udo, Irina from the Jewish community and I, often cooked for him. When I picked him up to bring him to our house, he first asked me how I was doing. I said, 'Oh . . . I'm content'. He looked at me, thought and said, 'That's good. Because I think contentment is worth much more than happiness. Because happiness passes quickly, but contentment remains, you have something that lasts longer. Come Manuela, now we're going to eat a fine meal'.

One of his letters was headlined: 'Good morning, good world!' It hangs now on the wall with me. If I read it, I think maybe a bad day can nevertheless be good. He talks about human destiny and our attitude to it, about the fact that we alone have the power to accept it and to choose contentment despite wherever life takes us. We ourselves decide to be satisfied or dissatisfied. He showed me that the world is better than I thought, that the good surpasses the bad. And I actually had the feeling in his presence that it was true! And that we can really rejoice with this kindness. He loved life and people; you could feel that by his side. His language and warmth were also understood by people who were not religious, and sometimes those who did not even understand our language at all, but simply felt and experienced him, just as I did at the time.

On my wall hangs his handwritten quote: ‘The world is not perfect’. Yes. But next to it, it says: ‘Gott sei Dank! Die Sache mit Gott’.³ We cannot explain everything, we cannot understand everything, but we can accept our destiny and move on with optimism and a smile. This is how I cope better on some bad days, because, with his optimism, his joy, his confidence and his friendship, he left us with more than he took with him through his death.

Willy Wolff became a friend and part of our family. When he sat on our ‘cozy’ couch in the living room, it reminded him of his childhood and his parents’ house in Berlin. That’s what he said.

A Memoir – Britta Wauer

The first time I met Willy Wolff was in May 2008 during the preparation for my documentary film ‘In Heaven, Underground’, which is about the Weissensee Jewish cemetery in Berlin. As the filmmaker, I was looking for a rabbi who could convey differences between Jewish and Christian mourning rituals and the concept of the afterlife in Judaism. Someone came up with the idea of asking Willy Wolff, a native Berliner and state rabbi of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. When I asked him, he immediately agreed to join. I had no idea that he would not only bring his rabbinic knowledge with him – oh no! An actor with a great sense of humour came to the interview.

That had been a stroke of luck for the film. He was witty, clever and charming when talking about death, mourning and the concept of the hereafter. When ‘In Heaven, Underground’ premiered at the 2011 Berlin Film Festival, Willy Wolff – although only a minor character – was the star. The film (about a cemetery!) won the Panorama Audience Award for the best documentary and was invited to more than a hundred festivals worldwide.

It did not matter where ‘In Heaven, Underground’ was shown – Beijing, Toronto, New York or Johannesburg – the audience laughed out loud at Willy Wolff’s words. Whenever I was invited to an audience discussion I was asked to tell more about *The Rabbi*. I mentioned that he is in his late eighties, commutes between London and Northern Germany, practises yoga every day and loves horse betting. The more I spoke, the more I wondered whether I should not make a film about this very special character.

In 2016, ‘Rabbi Wolff – A Gentleman before God’ had its cinema release. It is a documentary film about the most unlikely rabbi in the world. While he always seemed cheerful and gave his wonderful

smile to everyone, Willy Wolff had to cope with many blows of fate himself.

It took a while before I grasped how exceptionally privileged we, the film team and later the audience, were: Willy Wolff opened many different worlds to us. For the film, we accompanied him to Royal Ascot horse races and to his orthodox relatives in Jerusalem. We filmed him during his weekly Russian lessons in Schwerin and in his childhood synagogue in Amsterdam, now an auction house. We watched him floating at the Dead Sea and visited the House of Commons, where he had worked as a reporter for many years.

Again Willy Wolff achieved something that seemed impossible: a film about a ninety-year-old was one of the highest grossing documentaries in German cinemas in 2016, and Willy Wolff himself became an admired movie star.

For me, and I am sure many will agree, Willy Wolff was one of the most wonderful, inspiring, charming personalities I ever met. I am grateful for all the time we have spent together, for his wisdom and his smile and for what we call '*Lebensfreude*', a deep joy for life.

A Closing Word from Willy Wolff

It is appropriate to close with Willy's own voice. He entered the Preacher of the Year competition of *The Times* with a sermon entitled 'Where Drivers are Passengers', and reached the final five contestants. It was published in *MANNA* 74 (Winter 2002), pages 28–29.⁴

It is 29 years ago that I wanted to make a career switch from the print to the electronic media. I applied to Independent Television News, I was duly invited to take a screen test and, on the day, did not stumble over one word or one inflection. And two weeks later I had a letter from the editor of ITN saying Thank you but NO thank you. So, I asked a friend of mine within the organisation to find out where I had gone wrong. And he came back to say that my test had gone perfectly well. But, he added, and I quote him, the editor thought you just did not look right. And at that I was relieved almost to the point of elation. For I had done all I could. I had not blown it. As for the shape of my face, there was and is absolutely nothing I could do about that, short of a great deal of plastic surgery, and I could not afford that on a rabbinic stipend. I look back on that failed attempt to break into television without a twinge of regret and even with some joy. Because where fate, that inscrutable chain of events in which we can ultimately glimpse God, where that finally took me was the rabbinate and that has given me greater rewards

and brought me deeper fulfilment than I could ever have dreamed. And that's it about life. My life and your life. We can do all we can to get to one destination and still end up at another. . . .

But because fate adds its bit of back seat driving to our own, that does not absolve us at every moment from choosing and doing what we think is right, right for ourselves and for the other people involved in any choice we make. The Judaeo-Christian tradition knows nothing of fatalism, knows nothing of determinism, does not counsel us to sit back and let events take their course. We are not actors in a script written on the heavenly multi-megabyte computer, and all that we can do is not to fluff our lines . . .

Because we are not islands entire to ourselves, as the poet and preacher John Donne taught us, the ultimate outcome of what we choose to do depends inevitably on the actions and reactions of other people and on the storm or the stillness in nature, the rain or the drought, and those are as hidden from our view as the car we cannot see around the corner. And it is with that unknown and unknowable, with the fact that one moment we are the drivers on life's journey and the next we are mere passengers, that we have to come to terms . . .

For any of us to walk with God demands keeping in step with God. And that is governed by the fits and starts with which our innermost souls move and grow. So, when you next have to make a choice or

Figure 2 Photograph © Manuela Koska.

take a decision, however fateful it may appear, be of good cheer and courage. If you set out to be a consultant, you may still end up as a classroom teacher. Or if you wanted to get to a studio, you may find yourself – in a pulpit instead. But the guts to make your choice and then embrace whatever consequences it may bring, be it achievement or disappointment, joy or grief, will bring you one supreme blessing. A feeling of peace in your heart and serenity in your soul.

Tony Bayfield CBE, DD (Cantuar) is currently Professor of Jewish Theology and Thought, Leo Baeck College. His most recent book is *Being Jewish Today: Confronting the Real Issues* (Bloomsbury, 2019; paperback 2020).

Julia Neuberger chairs University College Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Whittington Health NHS Trust. She serves as a cross-bench (independent) member of the House of Lords and is Senior Rabbi Emerita of West London Synagogue.

Alexandra Wright is Senior Rabbi at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, London. She was ordained at Leo Baeck College, London in 1986.

Manuela Koska was born in Ruedersdorf near Berlin. Since 2009 she has been an independent photographer and publicist. In her portraits and reportage she addresses urgent questions to today's society.

Britta Wauer, born and based in Berlin, is an award-winning filmmaker. Her work focuses on contemporary history and biographies and has been screened at festivals worldwide.

Notes

1. Much of this (including the quotations) is taken from *Rabbi Wolff and the Essence of Life: Memories and Insights*. Compiled by Britta Wauer and translated by Bea Green (Paragon Publishing, 2016). Note the copyright of the English version: © James Leek.
2. A longstanding journalist he was accredited to Downing Street for approximately forty years. He reported on global events for several national newspapers, accompanied a British Foreign Minister travelling across China and the Soviet Union, reported on European heads of state. During the 1970s he made several guest appearances on German TV as part of a political discussion programme. He covered the work of British Prime Ministers from Anthony Eden

to John Major, and even served the latter as a ghost-writer in the election campaign of 1992.

3. A literal translation of the first phrase would be 'Thank God' or 'Thank goodness'. But the second phrase seems to be taken from the title of a book by Heinz Zahmt, perhaps translated as *The Thing about God: Protestant Theology in the 20th Century* (editor).
4. See <https://lbc.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/manna-74.pdf>, last accessed 2 March 2021.