

Obituary

David Aronson - left wing lawyer

Born: 2.11.1915 Died: 24.1.1999

Fran Hogan, Melbourne

Fifty years in practice, he was one of Victoria's most distinguished Plaintiff's lawyers. Mentor to generations of labor lawyers, he was also a member of the famous "Swanston Family", a group of leftwing writers, artists and intellectuals.

A larger-than-life figure at the Melbourne Bar by virtue of his intellect, compassion and relentless pursuit of his client's rights, David Aronson, was a life-long activist for ordinary people. A firm believer in law not only as a great protector of individuals, but part of a wider political struggle, he attended his first political meeting at the age of 12 and at his death, aged 83, was still fighting the workers' cause by advising a legal team representing some ex-service personnel in the Maralinga case.

Born in 1915 to a young couple recently migrated to Australia from Israel, he spoke only Yiddish until he went to school. His parents ran a fruit and vegetable shop, and as a child Dave would often go with his father to buy stock at the Victoria

Market. Dave and his younger brother Aaron used to scandalise the immaculately turned-out equitation students along the Yarra by galloping the family's much-loved carthorse bareback in their midst.

Dave studied law at Melbourne University during the Depression. He made speeches at Yarra Park and addressed factory gate meetings. He helped organise the legal and political battles in the cause celebre of Egon Kisch, a journalist who came to Australia to speak at anti-fascist rallies. Menzies wanted to exclude Kisch because he was a communist so, as part of the "dictation test" immigrants had to complete Kisch's test was administered not in English, but in a

Gaelic dialect. Kisch challenged the legality of this in the High Court, and won.

It was at this time that Dave became part of "The Swanston Family" a stellar group of left-wing activist, artists, writers and intellectuals based at the Swanston Family Hotel. It included writers Judah Waten and Alan Marshall, and painters Yosl Bergner, Noel Counihan and Vic O'Connor, who all became life-long friends.

Admitted to practise as a solicitor in 1939, Dave started his professional career in Ballarat. When war broke out, he refused the desk job and rank of army captain permitted by his law degree, enlisting instead as a private. He served in Western Australia and New Guinea. After the war, he returned to Ballarat and resumed practice, this time in partnership with his wife Alice, whom he met when they were both campaigning against Franco's fascists. It was a unique legal practice, husband and wife, practising together both politically radical, and she only the second woman admitted to practise in Victoria. Dave was for a while regional president of the local Law Society and received a medal from the Labor Party for 40 years service.

In 1979, some time after Alice's death, and after marrying Sandra, he went to the Melbourne Bar, working before the old Workers' Compensation Board on the side of the workers. He was an astute advocate, and a tough negotiator. He particularly liked negotiations on Friday afternoons, because some of his opponents seemed more than usually anxious to avoid hearings at those times. Never scared of a fight, when his opponent would make a first offer to him at the old Workers' Compensation Board, Dave so often exclaimed: "But it is not even the arrears!" that he eventually became known

as: "It is not even arrears Aronson".

He was a tremendous enthusiast, never shy of sharing his thoughts and strategies with his instructing solicitors by ringing them at 5 a.m. or of gently but firmly ticking them off if he thought they had not prepared their cases properly. His enthusiasm was tempered by great humour. One young barrister, upon sheepishly telling him that she was, for once, appearing for an insurance company against a worker, was advised, tongue in cheek "You might find that you can still do quite a lot of good for the cause this way, anyway". He was inspirational to younger practitioners, a great and gentle teacher. He showed them not only the skills of the trade but also how to make a difference, helping people in trouble.

Dave's warmth and hospitality were legendary. He was a born socialiser. A man of great culture, he maintained a life-long passion for literature, political history and music. He moved easily within the Jewish community despite a lack of religious belief, and at the time of his death, was helping to arrange the translation of some Yiddish stories.

He never used his great gifts to gain wealth or power. He was never in law for the money. He never sold his clients out short, and never pressured them to take less so that he could "process" their claims more cheaply. Way before it became an advertising slogan, his policy was "no win, no fee". His life was testament to his beliefs. He was truly a workers' advocate.

He is survived by his daughter, two sons and their families. ■

Fran Hogan is a member of the Victorian Bar, phone (03) 9608 7555, fax (03) 9608 8968