

**Manfred Gerstenfeld: Robert Wistrich: A Passionate Defender  
of the Jewish People  
isranet-publications  
Blog, May 22, 2015  
<https://www.isranet.org/blog/manfred-gerstenfeld-robert-wistrich-passionate-defender-jewish-people/>**

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**Professor Robert Wistrich was the leading historian of anti-Semitism, and published important books in other fields of history as well. The combination of his intellectual depth and prolific authorship reflected his being an expert in many aspects of the anti-Semitism field. His presence was most important in an area where the number of scholars has unfortunately not caught up with the recent explosion of hatred and its mutations, from despising the Jewish religion and the Jewish people to the defamation of the Jewish State.**

**Robert was a spokesman and a representative of the Jewish people, roles to which he stayed fully committed. The many projects he led included a joint exhibition of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and UNESCO on “Book, People, Land - The 3,500 Year Relationship of the Jewish People With the Holy Land.”**

**A very different matter was his membership of the International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission - established in 1999 - which reassessed Pope Pius XII’s role in the Second World War. Robert did not let his integrity become affected by pressure from Church sources, which eventually contributed to the premature suspension of the Commission’s work.**

**When one writes the obituary of such an outstanding intellectual, his biography and many human qualities show some aspects of his personality, and others can be seen by focusing on some of his great analytical work.**

**Decades ago, I read a publication of the World Union of Jewish Students. Among the many articles written by the student authors was one which stood out by far above the rest. That was how I came across Robert’s name for the first time.**

**Anti-Semitism studies became a field of research thanks to the French scholar, Léon Poliakov (1910-1997), who wrote much of the fundamental works in the field. However, it required the development of a high-level institute to cover the field in greater scope, and Robert was instrumental in this endeavor. He held the Neuberger chair for Modern European and Jewish history at the Hebrew University**

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**of Jerusalem. When Robert took over as head of the university's Vidal Sassoon International Center in 2002, he transformed it into a place which published a broad array of anti-Semitism scholarship, covering many countries and subjects.**

**Robert was not only a very skillful writer but also a sophisticated speaker. Born of Polish Jewish parents in the Soviet Union, English was not his mother tongue, but one among the languages he mastered. This and his encyclopedic knowledge allowed him to gain deep insight into various cultures.**

**It is impossible to review all of Robert's works unless one writes a lengthy essay - so I will focus on some of his more recent publications. His magnum opus, *A Lethal Obsession*, subtitled *Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*, came out in 2010. Its individual chapters can be read as self-standing essays.**

**In this book, Robert devoted an entire chapter to "Jews against Zion". He covered the history of Jewish self-haters, beginning with the apostates in Christian Spain after the massacres of the Jews in 1391. He referred to a statement already quoted by the turn of the 19th century Viennese playwright, Arthur Schnitzler: "Anti-Semitism did not succeed until the Jews began to sponsor it." Extreme masochistic trends, including psychological self-flagellation, which regularly occur among Jews, probably exceed those among other cultures. Robert's analysis, for example, of the post-war Austrian Jewish chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, a socialist whitewasher of former Nazis, was lethal.**

**Many scholars look away from the widespread anti-Semitism emanating from Muslim states and from parts of the Muslim population in Western countries. Despite the backlash, Robert remained outspoken when his post-9/11 essay on Muslim anti-Semitism, originally published in English, was updated and republished in German in 2011. Therein, Robert claimed that the hardcore anti-Semitism in the Arab and Muslim world is comparable only to that of Nazi Germany. Expressing such an opinion was far more than an academic judgment. It was an act of courage. Much more gentle criticism about extreme ugly phenomena in Muslim societies was already being labeled as Islamophobia. Such criticism is constantly stifled not only by Muslims but also by many "politically correct" Westerners. Robert explicitly stated that Muslim hatred for Israel and Jews is "an eliminatory anti-Semitism with a genocidal dimension".**

**From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel came out in 2012. The book includes the chapter, "Great Britain: A Suitable Case for Treatment?"**

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**Robert had studied in the UK, where the British literary classics on the school's curriculum were almost all anti-Semitic in nature. Robert's analysis started with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales from the late 14th century and Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta from the end of the 16th Century. He came out unequivocally against the whitewashing of the anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice.**

**Probably more so than anyone else, Robert has proven that anti-Semitism is not only inherent in European history but that it is an integral part of European culture. I once persuaded him to lecture at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs about the long tradition of intellectual anti-Semitism. He illustrated how each change in the social environment brings about a mutation of anti-Semitism. In Europe, Catholic anti-Semitism laid down the ideological infrastructure from which much of the demonizing of the Jews, Judaism and the Jewish people developed. From Martin Luther and Protestantism to the Enlightenment, including Voltaire, from the great German idealist philosophers, the early French socialists, to Karl Marx - many intellectuals and innovative movements gave their own "contribution" to anti-Semitism.**

**Robert was a passionate and tireless fighter for his ideas. A comrade-in-arms against the many ugly enemies of the Jewish people, and a man of principle, I had the privilege of last speaking with him - a lengthy, and as always, stimulating and pleasant conversation - during the recent Global Forum for Combatting Anti-Semitism, a few days before his passing. His sense of purpose remained unabated until the very end. Like all great intellectuals, he will live on through the legacy of his profound work and original thought.**