Architect Joseph Rykwert has passed away in London at his home in Hampstead next to the house of his lifelong friend Elias Canetti. He was born in Warsaw in 1926 into a Jewish family and with his parents and brother, after a journey full of obstacles, took refuge in London as Poland was occupied by the Nazis.

Joseph studied architecture and after the war worked with Le Corbusier. When he first came to Italy in the late 1940s he became friends with Gio Ponti and collaborated on his magazine Domus. Rome, Milan and later Venice became home for him, and Italy would always be his third home after Warsaw and London. Architects such as Rogers, Piano, Gregotti and Aulenti were his friends, and also writers. In Rome he met Filippini and Calasso, who later published some of his books in Adelphi. Rykwert is a friend of Italo Calvino and John le Carré. He always had the elegance and appearance of an English gentleman with his colourful ties, as well as professorships in Architecture at Cambridge in England and at U Penn in Philadelphia and lectures and courses at Princeton and Harvard. Joseph received an honorary degree from the University of Bologna.

He spoke Italian like an Italian, French like a Frenchman, German like a German, and then of course Polish, Yiddish, Russian, Spanish and Hebrew. He wrote in English, which was his main language, books of great success and prestige such as ‘On Adam's House in Paradise’ or ‘The Idea of a Town’.

More than a designer, Joseph became a teacher, a distinguished professor of architecture and a scholar of Leon Battista Alberti, of whom he curated a very important exhibition at Palazzo Te in Mantova. What mattered to him besides architecture, music and literature and the love for his wife and children was friendship. He was a cheerful and very religious man. He was born Jewish, but in the post-war years, thanks to his acquaintance with the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, he had converted to Catholicism and had a deep faith.

We met in New York in the ‘70s and always frequented each other through mutual friends Roberto Calasso and Francesco Pellizzi, and since I moved to London about fifteen years ago we have seen each other often. We used to eat at his club on Brook Street or at a fish restaurant near his home. We talked particularly about mutual Italian friends, his friend the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, or the book he was writing about the city as a body that he was unable to finish.

With Joseph disappears one of the last Jewish intellectuals from Eastern Europe and Austria who took refuge in London during the war and became key figures in the English cultural world. I am thinking of the publisher George Weidenfeld, the artist Lucian Freud, the historian Eric Hobsbawm, the writer Elias Canetti and many others.

I felt the need to write about Joseph because I used to visit him in his flat where every room was painted a different colour and from where he had become too frail to leave. He was still working, reading without his glasses and listening to classical music. In my latest novel ‘The Silence of Pound’ he is one of the characters. I asked him, ‘What do you want me to call you?’. He said ‘Luke’, and so I did.

Even though he was deeply Catholic, however, he asked me to recite the Kaddish at his grave: the prayer that Jews recite for the dead. The last time I saw him he was in his bed skinny and tired but smiling. I asked him: ‘How are you?’ He replied: ‘I am waiting to die.’

Alain Elkann 18th October 2024