

Eulogy of Robert Schwob  
delivered at the Veyrier cemetery, Geneva  
May 21, 2003

Katja, my sister Marianne and my brother Philippe join me in thanking you for your good wishes and for being here to mark the passing of my father Robert Schwob.

My name is Pierre Schwob and I wish to share with you some remarks about my father, his life and the man.

Before I start however, allow me to apologize for speaking in English, but I haven't spoken French often during the past 36 years et mon français est plus rouillé que le Titanic.

My father was "un grand bonhomme" - a formidable man - who lived a full life, a successful life, mostly a happy life.

He was a man of principles and a man of vision. He was a man of iron will and a man of unshakable dignity. He was a man of impeccable intuition (more than a man of logic); always a leader and yet a constant servant to his love for his children. He knew the value of money and yet could be extraordinarily generous. A man driven by an ever present sense of duty.

He was a man interested in many things - and equally uninterested in many things. But his interests, if distilled to a single essence, were centered around one principal notion: the human character - I mean the moral character of the people he met or the men and women he worked or played with. To him, genius was far less important than the moral fiber of the individual he was dealing with.

Robert Schwob was born in a Jewish family in 1914, a few months before the onset of the First World War, in Porrentruy in the Canton of Bern (now Juras). He often remarked that had he been born just a few kilometers to the north, he and his family would have been gassed, exterminated during the Second World War. He was a good and grateful citizen of Switzerland. He was the only man I knew who said that he, and we, should pay our taxes with a smile! And he did.

When he was very young his family moved to Geneva where he did all his schooling - at L'École Brechbuhl and at the Collège Calvin. In his early twenties, he suffered the loss of his younger sister Suzanne, to whom he was very close, to leukemia. If the shock was terrible to him, it was devastating to his parents. His father, Lucien Schwob, lost a great deal of his joie-de-vivre and he died only a few years later. His mother, Hélène, also never recovered fully and was always haunted by this tragedy until her own death many years later.

Although his father Lucien had groomed Robert to take over his little stores in Geneva and Vevey (The Comptoir des Tissus), my father was, at the time, reading the works of André Gide and Jean Giono, authors who celebrated the earth. Shortly before the war, my father had been sent to make an apprenticeship at one of the department stores in New York. (This was partly due to the entreaties of Général Guisan who urged Jewish families to send their children to the U.S.) But he had other ideas: He pre-wrote 52 postcards which he gave to a friend with the instruction to mail one, each week, from New York to his parents in Switzerland. Meanwhile he drove cross-country to find himself a small farm that he could afford.

He ended up buying some desert in the Imperial Valley in California, close to the Mexican border. And for the next several years he developed it into a very successful and large ranch.

During that time he met our mother, M'Liz, a WASP from Beverly Hills with whom he had four children, one of which - Catherine - died soon after birth. Shortly after the end of the war, his father passed away and, having inherited the two stores, the decision had to be made whether to stay in the States and sell the stores, or to return to Switzerland and sell the ranch. As his marriage to M'Liz wasn't happy and, probably more importantly for him, given that he believed that his children would get a better education in Geneva than in the middle of the Imperial Valley, he opted to return to Switzerland. He sold the ranch and then began to develop the business inherited from his father.

He often said that one of the secret of his successes had been the ability to select the right collaborators and to be able to delegate. He certainly knew how to surround himself with trustworthy and capable cadres but I believe that his success was also largely due to his unerring business instinct and, indeed, the loyalty he elicited from his collaborators.

During that time he also enjoyed an active social life, competed in horse shows and sailing regattas. It is worth to note that, although my father was always conscious and proud of his Jewish heritage and identity, he also felt rather completely integrated in the various social milieux he immersed himself in. "Il était toujours bien dans sa peau." It didn't hurt either that my father enjoyed a considerable amount of charm.

He built his dream house, La Ferté, on the lake with a view towards the Mont Blanc.

In 1957, he married Mercia Tinker, one of the great beauties of the time (still is!) and a woman endowed as well with a sharp intellect. Mercia was surely instrumental in expanding my father's already considerable horizons. One of the couple's signal achievements was their devotion to, and successful support for, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

By 1974, the Comptoir des Tissus had morphed into the Comptoir des Tissus et Confection and finally into Contis - a chain of eleven stores throughout Switzerland. Then my father received an offer to sell the enterprise to a global chain of stores owned by the Brenninkmeijers of Holland. This he did and in short order he divorced and retired.

His present to himself for a job well done was to hire a 65 foot sailboat and a crew to sail around the world. He asked his friend Katja to join him, indicating that should they still love each other after all these years at sea - they should marry. They did and they did. And lived happily ever after.

I take this opportunity to give my, and my siblings', heartfelt thanks to Katja for her extraordinary devotion to our father, particularly during these past 10 years during which her husband's health started to decline. They loved each other and it was invariably heartwarming to see them together.

Thank you.

*Pierre R. Schwob*  
*Geneva, 20 May 2003*