

# Kalmen Kaplansky

1912 - 1997

**K**almen Kaplansky, who devoted his life to human rights and the trade union movement, was born in Bialystok, Poland, and came to Canada in 1929 when he was 17. He had only about 10 words of English and, in those Depression years, could not go to school. He learnt English with a few weeks at night school and through reading in libraries, and through a friend got a job as a typesetter (1932-43). He returned to visit his family in 1939 and narrowly escaped being caught by the Nazis, according to his wife, Esther, whom he married in 1945.

He served in the armed forces in World War II, and returned



to become national director of the Jewish Labour Committee of Canada (1946-57), and then, when the Canadian Labour Congress was formed in 1956, its international affairs director and secretary of its human rights national committee (1957-66).

His concern for international betterment and understanding was reflected in many ways. He was the Alternate Member of the Canadian National

Commission on UNESCO (1957-66); attended the General Conference of UNESCO in 1958 and the 18th UN General Assembly in 1963.

He began a long association with the International Labour Organization in 1957. John Harker, who headed the Canadian branch of the ILO after Mr. Kaplansky, said. "He did a significant job of getting people to see that the ILO was connected to social and economic growth, and not just diplomats talking to each other."

Dick Martin, secretary-treasurer of the CLC, remembered a trip to Israel in 1980 with Mr. Kaplansky who had officially retired. "An Israeli official was giving us a long line about how well they treated the Palestinians. Finally Kalmen couldn't take it anymore. He said: 'This

is a lot of hogwash. The way you're treating the Palestinians is intolerable'." Mr. Martin recalled the stunned look on the official's face. "Kalmen was a small man, so you might be deceived into thinking he was meek, but he certainly wasn't, especially where human rights were concerned. He was kind, but he didn't stand for any nonsense."

The dedication on the honorary doctorate he received in 1953 from the University of Ottawa reads: "A central theme of his life's work was human rights. His efforts eventually contributed to the establishment of human rights commissions in all the provinces, as well as to fair employment legislation" He received the Order of Canada in 1980.