

U.S.

Frank Wilkinson, Defiant Figure of Red Scare, Dies at 91

By RICK LYMAN JAN. 4, 2006

Frank Wilkinson, a Los Angeles housing official who lost his job in the Red Scare of the early 1950's and later became one of the last two people jailed for refusing to tell the House Un-American Activities Committee whether he was a Communist, died Monday in Los Angeles. He was 91.

Mr. Wilkinson, whose experiences inspired a half-century campaign against government spying, had been ill for several months and was recovering from surgery and a fall, said Donna Wilkinson, his wife of 40 years. "It was just the complications of old age," Mrs. Wilkinson said.

In 1952, when Mr. Wilkinson was head of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, he spearheaded a project to replace the sprawling Mexican-American neighborhood of Chavez Ravine, home to 300 families and roamed by goats and other livestock, with thousands of public-housing units.

Real estate interests that viewed public housing as a form of socialism accused Mr. Wilkinson of being a Communist. When asked about this, under oath, he declined to answer, causing a furor.

After a City Council hearing, in which Mayor Fletcher Bowron punched a man in the audience who had called him a "servant of Stalin," Mr. Wilkinson was questioned by the California Anti-Subversive Committee. Mr. Wilkinson was fired along with four other housing officials and five schools employees, including his first wife, Jean.

The housing project was scuttled and much of the land eventually turned over to the city, after which it became the site of Dodger Stadium, new home to the former Brooklyn Dodgers.

The entire episode has inspired books, documentaries, a play and even a recently released album by Ry Cooder called "Chavez Ravine." "Every church has its prophets and its elders," one song goes. "God will love you if you just play ball."

Mr. Wilkinson consistently refused to testify about his political beliefs. He had, in fact, joined the Communist Party in 1942, according to "First Amendment Felon," a 2005 biography by Robert Sherrill. He left the party in 1975.

Mr. Wilkinson continued his antipoverty activities and, in 1955, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, which wanted to know whether he was a Communist. This time, Mr. Wilkinson used what he believed was a novel approach. Instead of claiming his Fifth Amendment right against compelled self-incrimination, he refused to answer on First Amendment grounds, saying the committee had no right to ask him.

The committee requested that Congress cite Mr. Wilkinson for contempt, but it was not until 1958 that he and a co-worker, Carl Braden, became the last men ordered to prison at the committee's behest. Mr. Wilkinson fought the contempt citation in the courts, but the Supreme Court, by a vote of 5 to 4, affirmed it.

At a press conference after the decision, Mr. Wilkinson said: "We will not save free speech if we are not prepared to go to jail in its defense. I am prepared to pay that price."

In 1961, the year construction began on Dodger Stadium, Mr. Wilkinson spent nine months at the federal prison in Lewisburg, Pa. He came out of prison, he said, determined to fight for the committee's abolition. For the next decade, he traveled the country, speaking and protesting, largely through his National Committee Against Repressive Legislation, based in Los Angeles.

On Jan. 14, 1975, when the committee was finally abolished, Representative Robert F. Drinan, Democrat of Massachusetts, paid tribute to Mr. Wilkinson, saying, "No account of the demise of the House Un-American Activities Committee would be complete without a notation of the extraordinary work done by the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation."

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132,000 documents covering 38 years of surveillance, including detailed reports of Mr. Wilkinson's travel arrangements and speaking schedules, and vague and mysterious accusations of an assassination attempt against Mr. Wilkinson in 1964.

A federal judge ordered the F.B.I. to stop spying on Mr. Wilkinson and to never do it again.

He is survived by his first wife, Jean, of Oakland, Calif.; their three children, Jeffrey Wilkinson, of Albany, Calif., Tony Wilkinson, of Berkeley, Calif., and Jo Wilkinson of Tucson; and by his second wife, Donna; her three children from a previous marriage, John, William and Robert Childers; 19 grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

Frank Wilkinson was born Aug. 16, 1914, in a cottage behind his family's lakeside retreat in Charlevoix, Mich. His father, a doctor, came from a family that had lived in America since colonial days. His mother was French Canadian. Mr. Wilkinson was the youngest of four children.

But Mr. Wilkinson was not finished with the federal government. When he discovered, in 1986, that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had been compiling files on him, he filed a Freedom of Information Act request for their release.

He was sent 4,500 documents. But he sued for more, and the next year the F.B.I. released an additional 30,000 documents, and then 70,000 two years later. Eventually, there were

Mr. Wilkinson's father fell in love with Arizona while posted there in World War I and moved the family to Douglas, Ariz., after the war. The family lived there until Frank was 10, then moved to Hollywood for two years while their permanent home was being built in Beverly Hills.

They were a devout Methodist family and firm Republicans. "Every morning of my life, we had Bible readings and prayers at the breakfast table," Mr. Wilkinson once said.

He attended Beverly Hills High School and then the University of California, Los Angeles, graduating in 1936. He was active in the Methodist Youth Movement, president of the Hollywood Young People's chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and an organizer for Youth for Herbert Hoover.

After college, considering a career in the ministry, he decided to tour the Holy Land. On the way, along Maxwell Street in Chicago, the Bowery in New York and later in the Middle East, he had his first glimpse at wrenching poverty, and he described it as a life-altering experience.

Mr. Wilkinson lost his faith and found himself adrift. "What do you do if you have no religion?" he said. "What is the basis of your ethics?" He chose to become active in efforts to eradicate the kind of poverty he had seen in his travels.

In later years, he would spend months on the road, speaking to whatever group would listen to him, usually telling his own story and answering questions.

In 1999, he received a lifetime achievement award from the American Civil Liberties Union. Four years earlier, the City of Los Angeles, which had once fired him, issued a citation praising Mr. Wilkinson for his "lifetime commitment to civil liberties and for making this community a better place in which to live."

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