
IAN BLACK

*Maxwell's farewell,
a very bizarre event*

A bitter wind
was blowing by
the time they
bundled Robert
Maxwell into
his grave

on the Mount of Olives, and the dying sun had left Jerusalem in ashen shadow. Even the weather and the light conspired to create a big, stagey departure to match the man.

He was dominant to the end: his corpse shrouded in a striped prayer-shawl on a dais in the Binyanei Ha'Umma convention centre seemed huge as the crowds filed past before the burial. His name – looking strange in Hebrew letters was printed on a white card placed on the body.

Two rabbis sat at his head, reading quietly from the Book of Psalms; and, incongruously – for that is not Jewish custom – two tall brass candlesticks burned. His wife Elizabeth and their sons and daughters – clad in black – watched silently from a row of chairs.

It was a state funeral in all but name: private security

men instead of uniformed soldiers shepherded the well-dressed mourners; but President Chaim Herzog was on hand to give the main eulogy. To him Maxwell was "a Colossus", not "Captain Bob".

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir came too, but there were no mysterious men in dark glasses to give credence to the charge – hotly and litigiously denied before his death last week – that Maxwell had worked with the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad.

There was a curious quality to it all, akin, perhaps to the idea of the *gvir*, the rich man in the parochial world of the East European Jewish *shtetl*, the benefactor who treats with the power of the gentile world but comes back, in the end, to his own people.

And there lay both the pathos and the schmaltz: "It was the emotional side of this stormy and eminently pragmatic man that returned him, after achieving honours and success, to his roots," President Herzog declared. "It is right and proper that he be here at last among us."

The only other speaker at Binyanei Ha'Umma was Mr Maxwell's son Philip, a thin, bespectacled figure, less like father than his brothers Ian and Kevin, with their dark slightly jowly looks. He had a poppy in his buttonhole, a generous reminder that others were grieving too on Remembrance Sunday, and that Britain, not Israel, had always been the dead man's adopted home.

"In battle he was a hero, in Fleet Street a giant," said Philip. "He climbed a hundred mountains and moved thousands more. Knowing that he'd had only three years of primary education, the scale of his achievement is breathtaking. He often reminded us of how much more he could have accomplished if he'd had the benefit of a first class education."

Private grief was open to the most searching scrutiny: representatives of the media that Robert Maxwell so dominated in his controversial life were perched above his open grave, cameras whirring as Philip – conspicuously bareheaded amongst the skullcapped men embraced a relative

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and the family watched, huddled against the cold, as the big body, unprotected by a coffin, was covered with earth.

There was a sad awkwardness about the final ceremonial rites in the gathering dusk: *kaddish* – the Jewish prayer for the dead – was said not as is usual by the sons, but by a rabbi and a family lawyer.

It was a memorable scene: as the eulogies were read out the Jerusalem sky was streaked dramatically in ochre and orange. God was implored to provide a perfect peace and the sound of the muezzin calling the Muslim faithful to evening prayer floated over the valley from the mosques on the Temple Mount.

The most eloquent last word went to the Israeli Labour Party leader, Shimon Peres, now in opposition but prime minister when Robert Maxwell turned aside from his global interests to seek the half-remembered tribal origins that brought him on his final journey yesterday.

"He was born as a Jew in the Czech diaspora and is buried here as a Jew on the Mount of Olives," Peres said, "He lost his breath in the vast sea, but not his soul. It will float above the waves as a marker to anyone believing that a man's life can be bigger than the cards he is dealt."