

Maximilian W. Kempner Obituary

Max Kempner died at home in Lexington, Massachusetts, on February 23, 2021, four days shy of his 92nd birthday. Lawyer, law school dean, humanist, lover of chamber music, painting and poetry, he relished life as husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather and friend. He was raised by deeply caring parents, Paul and Marga Kempner. He was close to them and his three siblings, with whom he shared the values that guided his actions. He was a descendant of the 18th Century German Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, and the composer, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. A native Berliner, he fled Nazi Germany with his family in 1938, first to England and then to New York. He was proud of his US citizenship and felt responsible for strengthening the rule of law and the spirit of liberty.

He graduated from Milton Academy, Harvard College where he concentrated in art history, and Harvard Law School. A slow reader, he felt that he had to study harder than his classmates, but he remembered what he learned. He studied law and economics at Columbia Law School where he earned an LL.M. His education never ceased, thanks to a series of close mentors, beginning with his father. He served in the US Army in Germany, where he taught at the Intelligence School in Oberammergau.

His life companion, partner, adviser, and spiritual guide was his wife of 68 years, Paige Mooney Kempner, who predeceased him in December 2020. Paige was a sculptor, writer and mother of their three children, Paul, Daphne and Emily, who survive him. Together with Paige, Max enjoyed life-long exploration of painting, classical music, and the natural world. He took special pleasure in introducing his grandchildren to art and music.

Max nurtured friendships. He sought out congenial people and he offered them kindness, humor, dedication and a lifetime's wisdom. He was a master of the dying art of letter writing. He relished exploring philosophy and spiritual values with friends regardless of their religious views. His annual Christmas letters, in which he discussed his evolving philosophy of life, were eagerly anticipated by his friends. He was interested in learning about the relationships of all living things. He kept asking the ultimate questions, always exploring and seeking, delighting in new insights and novel ways of looking at life's big questions.

He practiced law in New York as a partner with Webster & Sheffield, concentrating on the representation of universities, foundations and public benefit organizations. He was known throughout the legal community as a man of decency and unwavering integrity. He was active in legal education throughout his professional life, serving as chair of the Section of Legal Education of the American Bar Association, which accredits law schools. He helped to develop clinical teaching at law schools through the Council of Legal Education for Professional Responsibility. He served as chair of the Supreme Court Fellows Commission. Throughout his career, he worked to improve the education and performance of lawyers. He taught as an adjunct at Columbia Law School. Later in life, he and Paige moved to Vermont, where he became the Dean of Vermont Law School. He was enthusiastically involved in the life of students, faculty, staff, the community of South Royalton and the State of Vermont. During his deanship, the school flourished, and he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws.

Other causes in which he was active were civil rights - he co-chaired the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under Law; environmental protection – he chaired the Vermont board of the Conservation Law Foundation; research libraries – he chaired the Council on Library Resources. He was active in the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the American Council on Germany. He chaired the Vermont Legislative Reapportionment Commission. He brought his love of chamber music to his work as a trustee of Marlboro School of Music, where he served for more than twenty-five years. Having played the violin as a boy, he liked to say that in his next life, he would be a cellist.