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From The Times

May 17, 2007

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Paul Oppenheimer

International authority on car brake technology who lectured eloquently about his experiences of the Holocaust

The mechanical engineer Paul Oppenheimer was an international authority on vehicle braking standards. His technical expertise was matched by a wry, compelling lecturing style that made him much in demand as a conference speaker. He liked to reflect on the brevity of the Ten Commandments compared with the dozens of pages involved in explaining European braking regulations.

Besides technical papers he wrote the so-called *Lucas-Girling Yellow Book* (1980, and 1994), a standard reference work for the industry.

His lecturing career developed only after his retirement from the motor industry in 1990, and in a quite different area. Unbeknown to his colleagues, he was a Holocaust survivor, who had come to Britain in his teens (with his younger brother and sister) after nearly two years' incarceration, first in the prison camp of Westerbork and then in Bergen-Belsen, where his parents died. (His four grandparents were put to death in camps further east).

His retirement coincided with a commemorative visit to Belsen in which he joined other survivors, relatives and liberators 45 years later. From then on he devoted himself to speaking about his experience and the lessons of the Holocaust.

By his death he had addressed about 700 audiences, mostly of schoolchildren, more than 100 of them at the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre in Notting-hamshire. The centre published his memoirs, *From Belsen to Buckingham Palace* (1996), whose sales exceeded 10,000 copies. In 2004 the University of Wolverhampton made him an honorary DLitt for his contribution to Holocaust education.

Paul Oppenheimer was born in Berlin in 1928 into a family of assimilated German Jews. His father worked for the banking firm of Mendelssohn & Co. The family moved to the Netherlands in 1936, and were then overtaken by the German occupation in 1940.

After liberation, Oppenheimer and his siblings returned briefly to the Netherlands and then went to London at the invitation of an uncle, their next of kin. In 1947 he moved to Birmingham, where he combined an engineering apprenticeship at BSA Tools (1947-52) with evening study towards a London University BSc in mechanical engineering, completed in 1954 with first-class honours. The following year he took an MSc in thermodynamics at the University of Birmingham. In 1958 he joined Joseph Lucas as a nuclear project engineer. When the group's nuclear diversification efforts proved abortive he moved in 1962 within the group to Girling. This became his professional home for 30 years.

In the mid-1960s disc brakes were introduced in cars, and Girling was a technological leader. Oppenheimer was involved in developing overseas markets, initially in Italy

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(with Fiat and Alfa Romeo) and Sweden (Volvo). He designed a pioneer dirt shield for the disc brakes on the Alfa Model 105 (Giulia and Giulietta), which enhanced braking in the wet. Such shields became a standard feature.

Oppenheimer was also an early Western visitor to the motor industries of communist Poland and East Germany, as well as Turkey and Brazil. He spent time in Japan, assisting Girling licensees with the introduction of disc brakes and other new equipment.

His career as guru and orator on braking standards began in 1970 when Girling appointed him technical regulations manager, and he joined the brakes committee of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders in London. Starting as a UK representative at specialist meetings of the European motor industries in Paris, he gradually acquired unrivalled international authority in his field.

He initiated the harmonisation of European and US standards for vehicle braking. A frequent speaker at the Society of Automotive Engineers congress in Detroit, he received prizes for the quality of his presentation. Other awards included the Clifford Steadman Prize of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (of which he was a Fellow), the SAE's Ralph H. Isbrandt Automotive Safety Engineering Award and, in 2001, the European Traffic Safety Award. He was appointed MBE in 1990 for services to the motor industry.

Oppenheimer is survived by his wife, Corinne Orme, whom he married in 1964, and by their two sons and a daughter.

Paul Oppenheimer, MBE, mechanical engineer, was born on September 20, 1928. He died of cancer on March 8, 2007, aged 78

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