

About My Father

"Is it so small a thing
To have enjoy'd the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done;
To have advanced true friends, and beat down baffling foes ... "

A Mathew Arnold poem that makes me think of my father, a man who lived his life to the full and it was no small thing. The last conversation I had with him, a few days before his death, still rings in my ears. Fifteen minutes on the phone, as allowed, yet somehow we found time to talk about Karl and Rosa, about the next chapter of his paper on marxism and science, about the writing I was doing. He spoke of his frustration with the weakness of the Left and anti-war movements, his regret that age and health prevented him from doing more, promising to discuss with me his ideas when we would talk the following Sunday. Our conversation ended with him describing the beer at a micro-brewery where he and Petr had gone the day before, his ever-present hope that the three of us and our families would have a chance to get together with him to enjoy good food, drink and conversation. And there is my father, completely engaged in the present, looking forward to the future, making it hard for me to believe that he is no longer around. Even at age 91, his end came too soon.

When I think of my father, I think of someone who could have so easily given in to bitterness and cynicism, but never did. He grew up in a family trying to break free of the discrimination and constraints of ghetto life by embracing a humane vision of a world of enlightenment and solidarity, and which held onto that vision in the 1920's when Reaction countered with its vision of war and hatred. Holding such views had costs. Born in Vienna, shunted back and forth between Leipzig and Poland in his youth, my father's transient beginnings were due to economic hard times, political hard times and the family discord such relentless pressure can cause. Discord and pressure which seem to have only strengthened his commitment to family bonds and to the socialism he saw as the alternative to the dog-eat-dog world around him.

Now so many moments that defined him and which constitute the legacy he leaves us, come to mind. To note but a few, there was his Bar Mitzvah in 1932, which his secular father insisted upon, arguing that in the Germany of that era it constituted an anti-fascist act. So he did, and though my father never wavered from his Marxist materialist outlook, he was far more learned in the traditions of Judaism than he would usually acknowledge. To complete the story, the son of the Rabbi who performed the ceremony was a school friend of my father's. He became a Communist and was killed in a German concentration camp -- as was the Rabbi. Then there was my father's participation in the last mass demonstration protesting a public appearance of Hitler, this in 1934 Leipzig. My grandfather was arrested days later, my father, grandmother, uncle had to quickly leave, for a precarious life without papers in Poland. Eventually all four were reunited in Prague where my father's real education began. There he began his study of chemistry, the aim at the time to develop skills useful to the furriers craft, his father's trade. He formed his first strong

social bonds, a few of those friendships lasting a lifetime. Lasting a lifetime too was the pain of the terrible fate awaiting those of his friends and comrades unable to leave before the Nazi occupation. And it was there that my father himself became a Communist, the convictions he formed then he never abandoned.

Arrived in the U.S. in late 1938, plunged immediately into radical activism, my father joined the army shortly after Pearl Harbor, fought in the Battle of the Bulge – experienced combat in all its horror. Although he believed that World War II was a just and necessary war, he saw no contradiction in also opposing war as a matter of principle. The stories of battle he told -- few enough, only after insistent questioning, only when we were older -- emphasized the awfulness, death and destruction he experienced. Though leave it to my father to find something beautiful in the midst of degradation, he befriended his company's mascot, Daisy, snuck her on the transport ship back home, and held fond memories of that dog to the end. He did have a way with animals. Who else would have the patience and understanding to teach -- not train -- our extremely well-fed cat Streaky to shake her paw.

My father showed his character too in his refusal to accept the offer of promotion from sergeant to officer. It may have been an anti-fascist war, but it was still a capitalist army; he was not about to jump sides and join management. I should add that my father lived in capitalist society but was not of it. When it came to a choice between common sense and what he understood as principle, principle always won out. In consequence of some of those choices, my folks last years were more difficult than they needed to be. For my father, however, to refuse giving a mile meant first refusing to give an inch.

A more fundamental such decision was his refusal to accept reparations from Germany as compensation for family losses due to the Holocaust. That had no validity to him unless all victims of fascism -- such as my mother's family -- were compensated. Beyond that, he rejected the concept behind reparations, seeing it as a poor substitute for needed fundamental change. A change he saw reflected in the GDR with which he stood in solidarity throughout its 40-year existence. Change he fought for in the U.S.

His activity as a Communist Party member was mainly in immigrant worker circles, trying to combat the conservative tide dominant in the 1950's. So too he was active in fraternal, peace, civil rights and pro-labor activities. The FBI did not take a benign view of any of this; my father was blacklisted throughout the decade. Not until 1959 did he find steady work, and that in his chosen field as a chemist, employed by Sealectro Corporation in Mamaroneck. It was a job that had meaning for him; the numerous patents he took out a testament to his skill. He didn't make money of them, but that didn't bother him as he didn't view science and technology as private property. What he did do was freely share his expertise as an industrial chemist with the GDR. And he continued to the end of his life to find ways to express his commitment to social justice, including through his involvement with the Unitarian Fellowship that is hosting this memorial.

My father led a life of intense political activity, it would be false to his memory not to acknowledge that. Yet it would also be false to his memory to reduce him to such commitments, for my father was someone who embraced life in all its beauty and wonders. I remember as a child his pointing out to me the constellations in the night sky, telling the myths behind each, mixing science and mystery in a way that

holds me to this day. Once I gave him a gift of a volume of poetry by Dylan Thomas, he was skeptical at first, then later told me how he loved the lyricism of the verse and the way it brought back to life the Wales he lived in some months while in the army. And I recall the pleasure on his face when he opened a gift Petr gave him, Steinbeck's telling of the legends of King Arthur, my father having grown up with tales of knights and adventurers, the taste for which never left him.

And my father was a man of deep love, a love freely, unreservedly given to family and friends, a love powerfully felt for my brother and me, for our families (which, of course, were his also), and for our mother. Anything we did was great because we did it, any school we attended, work we performed, task we accomplished, made "special" by virtue of its connection with us. Growing up that way could sometimes be difficult, sometimes feeling like over-praise -- nothing could annoy my mother more than when my father would compliment a meal she prepared that did not rise to her high self-standards. But it was not blind love, he paid attention to who we were, wanted for us what we wanted. Ultimately what mattered to him was not that Petr or I follow one particular path or the other, what mattered to him was that we find our own path to live a useful life, find our own source of happiness. The same was true of what he saw in and hoped for in each of his four grandchildren, what he wanted his two great grandchildren to discover.

One last characteristic -- my father had a remarkable tolerance for both physical and emotional pain. He would suffer from such as would anyone, but he wouldn't let it change his disposition, prevent his strivings, keep him from enjoying life. Only one pain proved too much for him, my mother's passing. I don't believe he ever imagined he would survive her. He pulled himself together after she died, managed to say goodbye to each of us as best he could, stayed engaged and involved in life, but ultimately that pain proved too much.

That is not the note on which he would want me to end. I will instead close with a quote from the "Ode to Joy," a favorite poem, from a favorite piece of music. I believe these lines are his most fitting testament:

Joy, daughter of Elysium
Thy magic reunites those
Whom stern custom has parted;
All men will become brothers
Under thy gentle wing.

Be embraced, millions!
This kiss for all the world.

Kurt Stand
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