

My Life as a Writer

As I write these pieces, surveying my life, it occurred to me to look back on my life as a writer. Calling oneself a writer strikes me as pompous, if not delusional, if you are not a serious writer, or if you do not earn your living as a writer. I am neither, but I have been writing since my schooldays.

In elementary and junior high school, we all had writing assignments and I always tried to be original or funny, and most of the time I received a good mark and a complimentary note: very original, or very funny. In Junior High School, we had a literary magazine, "The Knowlton Herald," and I joined the staff and wrote a couple of stories and a couple of poems. They were childish, something a 13 year old would write. My mother was pleased, and I was proud. Phil Alexander, who was a year behind me, wrote epic poems, which blew me away. He was a writer!

In high school, I tried keeping a journal. Calling it a journal sounded more grown-up than a diary. After a few months of the same repetitive—"I got up, had breakfast, caught the train to school, met X, had a test, went to work" etc, the entries became more infrequent. (However, when the computer entered my life, I resumed these jottings.)

One of my new high school friends, Maurice Dunst, was the editor of Stuyvesant's literary magazine, "The Caliper." He was aware of my interest in writing and encouraged me to write something, suggesting a "how to..." piece. I came up with an article about graphology: how to tell someone's personality through his handwriting. I did some research, got a writing sample from a friend, analyzed it, and voila!, my article was published. A couple of pieces in one's junior high and high school magazines do not make you a writer.

I thought briefly about writing for my high school and college newspapers, but I worked after school, and the papers demanded a great deal of after-school time. Many of the students who wrote for them were interested in careers in journalism. I wasn't. While in high school, I met a neighbor, David Futornick, who fantasized that we could be song writers. He would write the music and I would write the words. We tried it for a few months, and gave it up. "I'm rolling along, singing a song..."

I wrote lots of papers in college. So did everyone else. In my senior year, I was president of the Economics Society and editor of the Journal of Social Science. I was in a position to take a paper that I had written for an Economics class on the Incandescent Lamp Cartel, and adapt it for the Journal. And I did, footnotes and all.

In 1950, I entered the ILGWU Training Institute, and its classes required writing many short papers on a variety of labor-related topics. I enjoyed writing them. During this period, Irv Weinstein and I became friends, and we noted that we both liked to write. Irv asked me a question which still intrigues me: "Do you write because you have something to say, or because you want to see your name in print?"

In March 1951, my mother died. I was organizing in Cleveland. I flew home, found her will, and made arrangements for her funeral. In her will she wrote, "In the event that my son JACOB

should prove to be a writer, I would like him to use the name Goldstein or Tsirelson.” I realized how my mother held writers in such high regard. To her, being a writer makes you immortal.

After the Training Institute, I went to work as an organizer for Local 38 of the ILGWU. I became a writer of leaflets. I would draft new leaflets almost every week, and distribute them to the workers at Bonwit Teller, Tailored Woman, Elizabeth Arden, Mainbocher etc. Not only did I write them, I would also design them, do the art work, and run them off on my own mimeograph machine. And make home visits at night. All for \$60 a week. (It was 1952.) I also felt a close connection to the staff of “Justice,” the union’s newspaper, and over the three years that I was at Local 38, I wrote a few pieces about the local for the paper.

In 1956, when I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee, I was delighted to learn that part of my job included editing “Labor Reports,” a monthly news service to the labor press. I felt very important. “Labor Reports” consisted of short news stories which I gathered over the course of a month, an editorial, a quiz called “Test Your Labor IQ,” a cartoon by Bernie Seaman, and a column by either Alton Levy or Harry Gersh. A few weeks before going to press, I would call Bernie and Al or Harry and suggest a few ideas. I, a 29 year old “pisher,” was suggesting ideas to three of the best in the business. I was also given the responsibility for editing all of the JLC’s English publications. I loved it. A story about my editing: In an article by Israel Knox, which we were to publish, Knox wrote about the Yiddish writer, Avram Liessin. I had never heard of Liessin, and assumed that he meant Avram Reisen. I sent Knox the corrected copy, and he called me, and gave me a lesson in modern Yiddish literature.

During the six years at the JLC, I wrote lots of speeches, pamphlets, articles, minutes of meetings, and countless letters. Nothing that I would call really creative writing, but I enjoyed putting words on paper. I was dimly aware that I was surrounded by the last generation of Yiddish writers: Jacob Glatstein, Chaim Grade, and Isaac Bashevis Singer, who would drop by the JLC’s dining room (ess tzimmer) from time to time. The Garden Cafeteria on East Broadway had closed, so they came uptown to the Atran Center at 25 East 78th Street.

In 1962, I left 78th Street for 160 Fifth Avenue, the Amalgamated Laundry Workers. As the Education Director, I also assumed the mantle of editor of the union’s newspaper. When the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACWA), our parent union, celebrated its 50th Anniversary two years later, we sponsored a concert of the New York Philharmonic and I wrote the program insert. It summarized the history of the laundry workers union and contained reproductions of paintings of laundry workers. And when a new contract was negotiated, I put together a booklet explaining its provisions, something that had never been done before.

We skip to the US Commission on Civil Rights where I worked from 1965 to 1986, starting as a Field Representative and ending up as a Regional Director. It was our responsibility to provide information to the Commissioners on the status of civil rights in the States in which we worked. Each State had Advisory Committees which undertook investigations, held hearings, and wrote reports to the Commissioners. The reports were published and disseminated across the State. Over the 21 years with the Commission, I wrote a lot of reports. I also wrote monthly regional office reports for the Commissioners.

My next job was that of “Member” of the Board of Review of the Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training. We reviewed and issued decisions concerning unemployment

insurance appeals. I was one of three members appointed by the Governor. After we made our ruling, a senior staff member would write the decision, to which all three members would affix their signatures. However, when I differed from my two colleagues, I would write a dissent. That was fun. I also became the poet laureate of the Board. When staff retired, I would write a poem in their honor. That was also fun.

I suspect this spurred me on to writing poems for special occasions, celebrating family and friends: birthdays, Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, anniversaries etc. I usually patterned the meter after a well known poem, though lately I have been doing sonnets. My friend Bob said there was a word for such a person. I was afraid he was going to say something like a bore, or a boor. He said it was applied to Oliver Wendell Holmes, so it couldn't be bad: an occasional poet.

My last job before I retired in 1997, was Inspector with the Massachusetts Attorney General's Fair Labor Division. Each inspection required the submission of a written report. I tried to raise the quality of those reports, but I don't think it was appreciated. What I did do to fulfill my need to write was to initiate a Division Newsletter, which I edited. The director was delighted. I was delighted. The staff didn't care much, one way or the other. When I retired, the director wrote a lovely tribute, and I wrote a farewell poem.

From time to time, the spirit, or a news item, moved me to write a letter to the editor. One was printed in the New York Times, and I basked in my 15 minutes of fame. On the strength of that I sent a few items to the Times' Metropolitan Diary. It wasn't published. Getting into the Jewish Advocate or the Brookline Tab is easy.

When I retired, I discovered the Brookline Adult Education program's class "Telling Your Story." I knew immediately that it was for me. I had been telling my story (and my mother's story), orally, most of my life. Now, I will be motivated to write it down and make it available to the world, fulfilling my destiny as a memoirist.

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