

26 IRVING HOWE

(On June 8, 1993, the Boston Democratic Socialists of America held a memorial for Irving Howe who had died the month before at the age of 72. I think it was chutspadik that Fran and I spoke at this event along with Rose and Lewis Coser and George Scialabba and George Packer. Fran, at least, had Howe as a teacher at Brandeis. I drew on some coincidences and my admiration for his writings, his politics and his brilliance. The following are my remarks.)

I feel that I have know Irving Howe all my life, although I may have been in the same room with him five times and exchanged no more than a few sentences with him each time. He was not easily approachable. And I was in awe of him. Of his knowledge and his insights into those areas if interest that I shared with him: Socialism, Yiddish culture, and labor.

I sought reflected glory in the fact that Irving Howe and I lived in the same neighborhood in the East Bronx. The fact is he was eight years older, and there was no contact until many years later. In his autobiography, Howe described the East Bronx as a self-contained little world where Yiddish was spoken everywhere. And he quoted his father after the family was forced to move from the West Bronx as saying “at least we are not on Fox Street. I lived on Fox Street. He later explained that he really didn’t see much difference between Fox Street and Jennings Street where he lived.

I also got a kick when I read about his childhood visits to Yankee Stadium sitting behind Babe Ruth, since I also went to Yankee Stadium as a kid, sat in the bleachers, but in my time it was Joe Dimaggio in center field. I shared a similar pattern of summer jobs, and the dream of parents that their child should become a high school teacher, and the challenge for those of us preparing to teach in the New York schools to pronounce Long Island without a hard g.

His Workmen’s Circle Shule was on Wilkins Avenue; mine was on Beck Street. His father wouldn’t let him go there. My mother sent me to the Beck St. shule and then to Hebrew school. The YPSL to which he belonged met at the Wilkins Avenue Shule Sunday nights. There was no YPSL in my immediate neighborhood. I was not recruited and I missed out on the political ferment that was a part of Irving Howe’s growing up: the street corner oratory and the debates in the City College cafeteria.

In the early fifties, I was working as an organizer for the custom tailors and alteration workers of the ILGWU. It was then that I met Ann Draper who was organizing for the hat workers. Her husband, Hal Draper, was the editor of Labor Action, the publication of the Independent Socialist League, the position Irving Howe held ten years before. Irving’s first contact with Max Schachtman was in 1937 at City College. I was invited to a meeting of the ISL by Ann and Hal to hear Schachtman. And he was impressive.(During the question period, an imposing figure arose, announced “my name is Maxwell Bodenheim” and proceeded to read a poem he had written.) No, I didn’t join ISL, but I did buy a sub to Labor Action.

In 1956 I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee and found myself surrounded by YPSLs, both Thomasites and Schachtmanites: Manny Muravchik, Phil Heller, Don Slaiman, Irving Panken, Harry Fleischman, Iz Kugler, Harry Gersh, and Julie Bernstein. I bought my first subscription to Dissent, I joined The Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, I read “The UAW and Walter Reuther”, and when Mike Harrington split with the SP-SDF over Vietnam, and DSOC was founded at the Hotel McAlpin in 1973, I was there, and saw and heard Irving Howe in action.

Over the years, I collected his books as well as Mike’s, and was excited about the Yiddish anthologies he was producing, confirming for me our similarity of interests. So many Jewish radicals and intellectuals were, as Irving noted, quoting Isaac Deutcher, “non-Jewish Jews.” The fact is, so was Irving, up to his meeting with Eliezer Greenberg, and his translating and editing of Yiddish writers. Isaac Bashevis Singer might have remained unknown to the non-Yiddish reading public if Irving didn’t get Saul Bellow to translate Gimpel the Fool.

Irving saw himself as a “partial Jew” –a man without contemporaries, since he felt that all that remained for Jewish identity was religion or nationalism, and he supported neither. Secular Jewishness was, to him, a period between faith and assimilation, like Alinsky’s description of an integrated neighborhood: the moment between all-white and all-black. To Howe, it was another lost cause.

But Irving did more to popularize Jewish Socialism than any other writer. He was unrivaled as a serious scholar, yet this 714 page book “World of Our Fathers” made the best-seller list, and gave him, as he described it, “his 15 minutes of fame.” He viewed its success as American Jewry’s readiness to say farewell to that world, and move on.

My son Lewis gave me the book in 1976 for my birthday, and my wife Fran gave me Irving’s autobiography “Margin of Hope” for my birthday in 1982. My family knows who (and what) I like. Our sector, the Jewish Socialist and labor movement, represented by the Workmen’s Circle and the Jewish Labor Committee, is forever in his debt. We at the Boston Workmen’s Circle wanted to invite Irving for a fund-raiser, but that’s out. We have lost another giant. Julie Bernstein in 1977, Michael Harrington in 1989, and now Irving Howe.

Irving called Michael “Our voice, our hope, our pride.” Leon Wieseltier called Irving “This skeptic, secularist and socialist; this great-souled man.” Irving Howe ends “World of Our Fathers” with the Hasidic tale of Rabbi Zusia, who said before his death: “In the coming world they will not ask me Why were you not Moses? They will ask me Why were you not Zusia?” Irving Howe was always Irving Howe.

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