

THE ROL

Having mentioned ROL (Reading Out Loud) so often, I decided to try to describe its origin, and how it evolved over the years. ROL is very important to me. Those who make up ROL are my closest friends. As I have been writing my story, I send each piece to my ROL friends and to my kids. We think of ROL as family—"mishpukhe." We are on each other's list of invitees to events, joyous or sad. Our photograph albums are filled with pictures of all of us at those events, and at our frequent get-togethers.

How did it start? This is my understanding: It started when several members of Club Lexington, the neighborhood AYD (American Youth for Democracy) wanted to party apart from AYD. They were around 16-17, several were dating (Sid and Barbara, Alex and Bernice, Bob and Evelyn, and a few others whose names I have forgotten.) Arthur Hurwith, who was part of this group, baby-sat for a family, the Elgarts, that encouraged him to have friends over to socialize and square dance. I believe Bob invited me, and Sol and Phil and Mel. We were all in the same junior high school class. We eventually moved on from the Elgarts, and started getting together at each other's homes. It was then that we began to call ourselves "Reading Out Loud."

Was it 1944? Who came up with the idea that we come together and share excerpts from books that we were reading? It was then expanded to listening to music, and to singing, A few other friends were invited. In 1945, after high school graduation, Phil enlisted in the Navy, and Mel, the Army. Then Sol joined the Army in 1946. Bob and I chose school deferments. Why Alex and Sid were not affected, I don't know. Possibly because Sid had poor eyesight, and Alex worked for a defense contractor.

By the late '40s, a few of the couples were clearly defined: Sid and Barbara married in December 1949, and Alex and Bernice in December 1950. Bob and Evelyn broke up, but Bob met Edna at summer camp, and she became part of ROL. Berna was also part of ROL, and Sol started to date her. In December 1949, Bob wondered if Phil would like to take Edna's sister Martha to our New Year's Eve party. He said yes, and they married in February 1951. I started dating Sylvia around April 1951, and we married in December. Sol saw a lot more of Berna, went off to Yale Law School, and in June 1952, they married. Bob started dating Rose and in 1954, they married, and then Mel met Ruth and they married in 1956. Everyone is now accounted for.

When I talk about ROL, I have a tendency to stress the seven guys. This is really not the case. From the beginning, Barbara, Bernice, and Berna (the 3 B's?) were very much a part of ROL. Soon after, Rose, Sylvia, Martha and Ruth, and somewhat later, Fran. But as I tell the story, I make it seem as if it was destined (bashert) that seven guys who all went to the same junior high school, would come together and remain together for the rest of their lives. I sometimes suggest we were cloned. There were striking similarities: All Jewish, with parents from Eastern Europe, struggling in the East Bronx through the depression. All creative, bright and ambitious. All with a social conscience. Three of us were very poor: Sol, Phil and myself. The other four were less poor: Bob, Mel, Sid and Alex.

What did we look like? Alex, Mel, Phil and I were tall. Bob and Sid were a few inches shorter, and Sol was an inch or two shorter than them. Sol had a saying, which may have been mostly wishful thinking: "They are all the same size in bed." Young women did find Sol attractive, curly hair, smiling. Objectively, I would say we were all good looking. Mel was rugged, Alex was blond and wiry, I was slim, Sid was athletic, Bob was cute, Phil had charm. Both Phil and I slouched. I am not sure what our self-image was.

Without having consulted with my friends, here are my thumbnail sketches of them, up to their first jobs:

Sol was the second of three children born to parents who came from Austria. He had an older brother who died, and about whom he never spoke. His father abandoned the family, but returned briefly, which resulted in the birth of his younger sister. They were on relief and moved frequently when they were unable to pay the rent. He is the only one of the group that did not go to Stuyvesant, because his mother did not want him travelling downtown. He went to Clinton High School, and joined us at CCNY. After a year, he enlisted in the Army to collect the GI Bill to pay for law school. He returned to City, then went to Yale Law, married Berna, and took a job as a lawyer in Phoenix.

Phil was the third of three children born to parents from Czernowitz, Russia. He had an older brother who left the family after high school, and Phil had little contact with him. His older sister was a nurse and she, her husband and two children lived with Phil and his mother. His father committed suicide when Phil was 10. Phil was shuttled among relatives, had part time jobs since he was 12, and managed to keep up with school, and keep his private life private. He and Mel developed an interest in chemistry in junior high school and developed a close friendship. On to Stuyvesant, then the Navy, CCNY, marriage to Martha, and graduate work in chemistry at Brandeis and lab work at Beth Israel, as Martha earned her degree at Radcliffe.

I have been telling my story for the past 15 years, so I will skip to:

Bob who was the youngest of four children. He had three older sisters, and his parents were from Poland. His father was a cloak and suit sewing machine operator, but there was little work during the depression. They earned a few dollars taking in boarders. Bob had a traditional Hebrew school education, had clarinet lessons, and had a good command of Yiddish. His older sister was a Yiddish stenographer, and he had an uncle who was a leader of an important Jewish left wing organization. Bob and I shared many interests in junior high and high school. At CCNY, he majored in Education, worked as a counselor at summer camps, and met Rose while teaching at PS 124. They married, he was drafted, and they spent a good part of his Army time in Panama.

Mel, like myself and Sid, was an only child. His father was a cloak and suit cutter who also struggled during the depression. He was active in both his union and in a small shul called "Lekhem Anayim" Bread to the Poor. Mel had a traditional Hebrew school education as well, but no music lessons, although he had a good voice and an amazing

memory for song lyrics. He was a terrific athlete, beating us, first at handball, and then at tennis. The four of us (see above) were in the same junior high graduating class, June 1942, and all went on to Stuyvesant, except Sol. Mel moved out of the neighborhood (as did Sol). And Mel enlisted on graduation, as did Phil. When he returned, he enrolled at Hunter College—for the girls—but then joined us at CCNY. He received his chem engineering degree, went to work as a paint chemist, met Ruth, married, and found another job and moved to New Jersey.

Sid (and Alex) were one term behind the other five of us, and were central to ROL. They also have the distinction of being from Hungarian rather than Polish, Romanian or Russian Jewish heritage. Sid has the further distinction of having an American born father. Mr. Stern worked as a clerk somewhere (Wall Street?). My memory of him (as my memory of Mr. Epstein) is of a man reading a newspaper. However, he read the Daily Mirror, where Mr. Epstein read the Tog. Mr. Stern also smoked a pipe, followed baseball, and said very little. His mother was a great baker, and at CCNY, we all tried to meet Sid for lunch, hoping that he would share some of his mother's baked goods. Again, a traditional Hebrew school education, a good athlete, and what made Sid stand out for me: he always had homework and term papers ready ahead of time. After JHS 52, Stuyvesant and CCNY, Sid also went on to NYU. Where Bob and I went to keep out of the Army, Sid really intended to get a PhD in Education. He had gotten married to Barbara while they were still undergraduates, and he and Bob (together with Rose) taught at PS124 as their first positions.

Alex may have been the least poor, but he may dispute that. His father was a tie-maker. I have no idea why a tie manufacturer would continue making ties when most other garment manufacturers were not manufacturing. Alex had a younger sister, and he and I went to Hebrew school together. Early on, Alex had developed a curiosity about science, and he began to specialize in physics and electricity. He also taught himself how to play the piano, and since his father had a car, he was the only one among us who could drive. I joked that I was out of place in Hebrew school and high school, but Alex was IN place, because the Hebrew school was part of a Hungarian Synagogue, and Stuyvesant was a science high school, and I was neither a Hungarian nor a scientist, and Alex was. He graduated from CCNY an electrical engineer, married Bernice, and found a job in Long Island.

Which brings us to the fifties. Politically, there was a great deal happening at this time. World War II had ended, but the cold war was beginning. We were all liberals, progressives, idealists, activists. We grew up supporting FDR, and in 1948 we were for Henry Wallace. All children of poor Jewish immigrants., we were now part of a blessed generation. We received the best education; jobs were awaiting us. We lived in New York, the center of culture—art, theatre, music, dance.

Some of us went on to teach in the New York schools: Bob, Rose, Sid, Barbara. Phil, Mel and Alex were in the sciences. Sol became a lawyer and moved with Berna, who had also been teaching, to Arizona. I went to work for a union, and Sylvia had different jobs, including teaching. The group spread out. Phil and Martha went to Austin and

Boston before moving to Yardley, PA. Alex and Bernice left New York for Florida. Mel and Ruth moved to New Jersey.

ROL was no longer meeting regularly, but we all kept in touch. We were now spread out even further. We had started in the Bronx, and only Sid and Barbara stayed there. Bob and Rose moved to Queens and then Oceanside Long Island, Phil and Martha to Yardley PA. Mel and Ruth to Princeton, Sol and Berna to Phoenix. Alex and Bernice to Sudbury, and Sylvia and I to Brooklyn, then to Washington DC. We all had children, a few of us lost children, and over the years, Sol divorced, I divorced, Sol remarried and divorced, I remarried.

And we kept getting together, and talking, and reading and singing, and reminiscing, and maintaining this remarkable friendship. For years, we would find a hotel or a motel somewhere in the northeast—New Jersey, New York, Connecticut or Massachusetts—where we would get together for a weekend. Something magical happened then. We were transported back to the 1950s and 1960s. We may have been 60 or 70, but we felt we were half that age.

Then, Mel and Ruth's son Dan bought a vacation home in the Berkshires, and a new tradition formed. Since Dan and his family used it on weekends, and in the summer, we became the beneficiaries, getting together there during the week twice a year, in the spring and fall.

Age and cancer were catching up. First Sid, then Mel died of pancreatic cancer. Sol was afflicted with what was initially thought to be Parkinson's, but was worse. Martha had a stroke, was having serious mobility problems, and Phil had broken a hip, and they moved into an independent living facility in Doylestown, PA. Their conditions worsened, and they are now in the nursing facility. Fran was diagnosed with lung cancer, had surgery, chemo and radiation, and has been told that she is cancer free, but has energy loss, trouble walking, and hearing.

The standing joke is that our get-togethers may turn into organ recitals. Our conversations touch on our mortality, our children and grandchildren, and the world we are leaving them. We are all slowing down, but we are all involved in something: travelling, organizational responsibilities, classes, book clubs, soup kitchens. Bernice gets the prize for being the last one to retire, and Bob has become a supercounselor at an adult camp. We all have some physical limitations, but we are going to keep getting together as long as we can. And we are going to remain more than close friends, til death do us part.

2014