

## Writers I Know and Have Known

Having just written about myself as a writer, (ha-ha) I started thinking about real writers. Over the years, I have gotten to know several published writers. Let the name-dropping begin:. But before I begin, I want to make clear that there are degrees of “knowing.” There is knowing, as in “I know X whom I met at a party.” But a one-shot knowing doesn’t count. There is knowing as in having taken a class with X, where X was a fellow student or teacher. If X knew your name, that counts, especially if X (if he or she is still alive) still knows your name. What really counts, is if you really spent time with X. That’s knowing.

At Stuyvesant High School, there were several teachers I knew who were writers. My favorite English teacher, who introduced us to Emily Dickinson, (Jacob—Emily; Emily—Jacob), was Bernard Frechtman. He was the translator of the French playwright Jean Paul Sartre (or was it Jean Genet). Joseph T. Shipley, also an English teacher whom I knew but didn’t have, reviewed plays for the New Leader. In high school, I worked at the NY Public Library’s Newspaper Division, and several well-know writers came in to do research. I knew them, but they didn’t know me. (I am not mentioning their names, because it doesn’t count, but I kept their call slips.)

At CCNY, I took classes with Hans Kohn, a wonderful historian, and a writer on nationalism, and with John Collier, an anthropologist (also wonderful) who wrote about the Indians of the Americas. I am sure I had classes with several other wonderful teachers who were also writers, but I can’t remember them.

David Dubinsky hired a lot of very talented people for the ILGWU, including writers. I was fortunate to work with Gus Tyler, who was the union’s political director and then assistant president. He wrote extensively about labor, politics, and even organized crime. Leon Stein was the editor of the union’s paper, Justice, and the author of a few books, including one on the Triangle Fire. Several officers of the union whom I knew were prominent Yiddish writers. The teachers I had in the ILGWU Training Institute included several writers: Economist Charles Silverman, labor historian Philip Taft, and sociologist Lewis Coser.

Almost everybody at the Jewish Labor Committee was a writer. If not in English, then in Yiddish. Across the hall was Dr. Joseph Kissman, who edited the JLC’s Yiddish publication *Faktn un Meynigen* (Facts and Opinions.) My boss, Manny Muravchik, wrote lots of speeches, articles and reports. Our boss, Jacob Pat wrote a very important book on the Holocaust, *Ashes and Fire*. It was written in Yiddish in 1946 and translated the following year. When I was editing *Labor Reports*, I worked with two terrific writers: Harry Gersh and Alton Levy. They wrote lots of books, and poems.

One of my responsibilities at the JLC was to organize a national conference on Labor and Civil Rights which was held at the ILGWU’s resort in the Poconos, Unity House. I had the honor of inviting Harry Golden, Editor of the *Carolina Israelite* and author of the best sellers *Only in America* and *For Two Cents Plain*, to address the conference. He accepted, I handled all the arrangements, and I found him to be a charming, funny and a creative advocate of civil rights. (In another piece, I describe my visiting Harry Golden in Charlotte many years later.)

Working for the Laundry Workers, I developed a friendship with Ed Murray, who wrote for the *Advance*, the newspaper of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACWA). We used to go out to

lunch. He told me that he was writing a novel. I was impressed, but doubted that it would ever get published. When I moved to Washington, Ed called to tell me that his book, *The Passion Players*, was in the bookstores. I rushed out to get a copy. There was a bookstore on Pennsylvania Avenue, a block from my office. They did not have it, and I told them to order it. I then went to several other bookstores, and urged them to stock it, because it is going to be a best seller. (It wasn't.)

Another ACWA friend was Stan Aronowitz. We shared the same politics, the same frustrations, and the same commitment to organized labor. He was more intense, more probing, and a he became a prolific writer. Stan followed the advice that I was given when I applied for a job with the United Auto Workers after graduating from college: get a factory job, join the union, then come see us. He worked in a factory, then organized for ACWA, and started writing. Stan moved into the big time with the publication of *False Promises*. He became a college professor, put on weight, and continued writing.

It seems all the socialists that I got to know were writers. Thanks to Ann Draper, who was organizing for the Hatters union when I was organizing for the ILGWU, I met her husband who edited *Labor Action*, the Schachtmanite newspaper and wrote a few books. And through Ann, I met the man himself, Max Schachtman. In Washington, I became friends with Stan Weir, who coincidentally was a Schachtmanite, and who was in Washington to do research on a book about union democracy. He eventually started his own publishing business, to print the writings of workers. When the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) was formed, I joined and I met its two most prominent figures: Michael Harrington, and Irving Howe. Turns out that my wife Fran knew both of them much better than I did. When Howe died, the Boston DSA (successor to DSOC) held a memorial. Both Fran and I talked about what Howe meant to us, as did another DSA member, George Packer, who now writes for the *New Yorker*.

In 1955, while stationed at Camp Gordon, Sylvia worked as a secretary to a Colonel with the Military Police. She became friends with a soldier, a fellow New Yorker, invited him to dinner, and he became a regular visitor. Curt Leviant, who was just out of college, told us that he is a writer, and shared with us a short story published in the *Hadassah* magazine, and a poem that appeared in the *New Yorker*. A good start. A few years later, he published his first novel, *The Yemenite Girl*, and started teaching at Rutgers. Unbeknownst to me, he had an excellent command of Yiddish and went on to translate works by Sholem Aleichem and Chaim Grade. We reconnected when he spoke at the Workmen's Circle resort, Circle Lodge.

When I started work at the US Civil Rights Commission, the Director was Bill Taylor and the Deputy Director was Carl Holman. It was a pleasure working under these two very committed people. What I didn't know was that they were both writers, but very different kinds of writers. Bill wrote a couple of books about civil rights. Carl was a published poet and playwright.

Having retired in 1997, I attended classes as part of Boston University's Evergreen Program. In the spring of 2001, one of the classes was being given by Saul Bellow. I expected a large lecture hall. Instead it was a small classroom, and the students were seated around a table, and the Evergreeners were seated against the wall. The class was "An Idiosyncratic Survey of Selected Works of Joseph Conrad." I believe it was Mailer who told Philip Roth that "Bellow is our Daddy." At this time, he looked like their Granddaddy, though he had become a father just a few years before. His lectures were repetitive and meandering, but I enjoyed his description of

the characters in Conrad's writing. Since Fran and I have almost every one of Bellow's books, I took a couple to class every week and at the end of class, asked him to sign them. He turned to the page with his name and graciously wrote "Saul Bellow" at the top of the page. There was no opportunity for schmoozing. (OK, Bellow didn't know my name, but it was on the roster.)

The Boston Workmen's Circle gave me the opportunity to get to know the poet, Robert Pinsky. It was January 1997, I was the vice chair, and planned a program called "Past Lives: The Jewish Immigrant Experience in America." It was to be a multi-media presentation with Yiddish songs, films of Jewish life, a Yiddish reading and a poetry reading. Having read Robert Pinsky's poem, *The Shirt*, I thought it would be great if he took part. Pinsky was teaching creative writing at Boston University. I called him, told him what we were planning, and asked him if he would participate. He gave me "a definite maybe." I followed up. The "maybe" changed to a "yes." We had a meeting of the participants at my home. He came. The program was presented at Hebrew College on March 16, 1997. I moderated. Pinsky was great. Less than two weeks after the program, Pinsky was named Poet Laureate. Coincidence?

Besides being a member of the Workmen's Circle, I am also a member of the Newton Center Minyan. I know many of the members, and they know me. The members who are writers therefore meet my criteria. First is Joan Leegant, a lawyer turned writer. She published a wonderful short story collection in 2003, and then a novel in 2010. Next is Len Lyons, whose most recent book is about the Ethiopian Jews of Israel, but he has also written about jazz and computers. He is also a terrific jazz pianist.

Finally, there is the son of a very close friend: Jon Rauch. Everyone in my special circle of friends "shep nachas" (take pride) from Jon's accomplishments. At 50, he has written six books, and hundred of articles for the *National Journal* and *Atlantic*. I am proud to say I know Jon.

(Since I plan to read this to the members of my "Telling Your Story" class, I want to acknowledge that I know every one of them, and they know me, and every one of them is a wonderful writer. I have learned a great deal from the stories that they have read in class, and I look forward to 10:15 am each Wednesday with great anticipation.)

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