

ALEX

I have known Alex Roth for more than 75 years, since the mid 30s. We went to Hebrew school together, but we were not close. At the time, Hebrew school was not the place to make friends. We went to “Hebrew” and left. No hanging out. Our friends were already established from our neighborhood or from public school. Alex lived several blocks away from me, was a term behind, and went to a different elementary school. My earliest memory of Alex was that he was tall, skinny, and blond. In junior high school and in high school, I was aware that he and Sid Stern were friends with Bob Epstein with whom I had become friends in our last year of junior high.

By the time we were all in high school, Alex, Sid, Bob, and several others had joined a group called Club Lexington AYD, American Youth for Democracy. Years later, I learned that AYD was formed by the American Communist Party after it disbanded the YCL, the Young Communist League. My friends were unaware, but I don’t think it would have made any difference. It was a place to socialize, and Bob, Sid and Alex were all dating three attractive young women, Evelyn, Barbara and Bernice, who were cousins. I believe that Bob’s girl friend, Evelyn, was a CP member. Sid eventually married Barbara, and Alex married Bernice.

Years later, when I asked Alex about his AYD membership, he said he went there for the girls. I do not think Alex was ever a political activist. He went along. All of us were left wing. We supported the American Labor Party in the early 40s, and the Progressive Party and Henry Wallace in the late 40s. I was beginning to define myself as part of the “non-Communist left.” I don’t know how Alex defined himself at the time.

The quality that made Alex “different” was his intense interest in science. It was clear that when he was interested in something that had to do with science—electricity, magnetism, astronomy—he would try to learn everything about it. I always settled for a general idea. I proudly boasted that I identified with the title of Oscar Levant’s book, “A Smattering of Ignorance.” Bob told me that one summer when we were in high school, Alex, who did not take music lessons, decided to learn to play George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” and he did.

Thanks to a mutual friend, Arthur Hurwith, several of us would come together to help him baby-sit for a family with a large living room that did not mind teen-agers partying. We square danced and sang folk songs and talked, and this eventually led to Reading Out Loud. I believe Bob invited me, Sol, Phil and Mel, and together with Alex and Sid, the seven of us became the male contingent. There was a female contingent, including the three above named, and others—Berna, Janet, Sophie--whoever we were then dating. When Bob and Evelyn broke up, Bob met Edna, then Rose. Phil started dating Edna’s sister Martha, I started dating Sylvia, Sol was dating Berna, and Mel met Ruth. Within a few years, we were all married.

Alex always seemed to know what he wanted, socially and academically. While Bob, Sid and I struggled through science at Stuyvesant, Alex, Phil and Mel thrived. (Sol went

to Clinton.) Alex loved Physics, while Phil and Mel's interest was Chemistry. I have visions of Alex performing all kinds of experiments. He may have even gotten prizes and awards. He would try to explain all kinds of stuff, but most of the time it was over our heads. We all went on to CCNY; Alex majored in electrical engineering.

I don't remember Alex being interested in sports. Among the seven of us, Mel was the athlete. Sid was a fine ballplayer, but Mel beat us all. Bob, Sol, Phil and I did what we could, but Alex seldom bothered. We used to play handball, always losing to Mel, and Alex would ask why do we have to keep score. When we graduated to tennis, I don't believe Alex joined us. I don't know if Alex even followed baseball. I was a Yankee fan, many of my friends were Giant fans, and many others switched to the Dodgers when Jackie Robinson joined the team. Alex now has a walking regimen. I believe that as he walks, he thinks. Alex also expressed annoyance at his older grandchildren's involvement in intramural sports. He saw it as taking time away from academic and cultural pursuits.

Alex has a remarkable mind. All of us were aware that he was a prober. He always asked why. It started with electricity. If someone asked me how electricity works, I would say you turn on the switch. Alex really knew what happened when you turned on the switch. Alex would think deep thoughts about cosmology, when I didn't even know the meaning of the word. He wanted to know how the earth was formed, how life began, was there life on other planets, were there other universes. He had a telescope, and would search the skies, and knew all about the stars and the constellations. The rest of us were happy to be able to identify the North Star and the Big Dipper.

Alex became an electrical engineer and worked for some outfit on Long Island. Then he worked for another outfit in Florida. Finally he ended up working on radar for Raytheon in Massachusetts. He obviously was well respected in his field, and was with Raytheon for over 30 years. He developed a circle of friends there, and when they retired, they maintained their friendship by going out to lunch regularly.

Alex's politics: So when did Alex move to the right? Or was he a closet conservative all along? Whether he was a member of AYD "for the girls," he still must have been aware of its politics. His father was a tie maker and a member of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. CCNY was a hotbed of left wing politics. Alex square danced, and sang folk songs and union songs with all of us. I assume he voted Democratic through the 50s, 60s and 70s. Aha! It must have been Reagan that turned Alex around. Jimmy Carter was rejected by a lot of people, many who were called Reagan Democrats. Was Alex one of them, or had he voted Republican before that? Sol also began deviating from the politics we once all shared. Some years ago, I was so troubled by the fact that Alex and Sol had moved to the right that I wrote a piece which I called "An Attempt to Put Into Words a Troubling Thought." The troubling thought was how one (or more accurately two) of us could reject the position we held all our lives. They began to claim that the pendulum has swung too far to the left, that whites were the victims of affirmative action quotas, and that welfare recipients would rather get handouts than work.

From time to time, Sol would equivocate, but Alex's position hardened. He would carry 3 x 5 cards with statistics to prove his point. He really became annoying. Eventually, we stopped talking politics. Even his children found his position extreme. Just as we read sources that agree with our position, Alex did the same, plus listening to Rush Limbaugh.

Alex as a teacher. Computer whiz, photographer

Alex as a father and grandfather