

Dad: II

I think Dad detached himself irrevocably from his family when he married. Upon graduation from law school he had joined the law firm of Leventritt, Cook, Nathan, and Lehman -- the very model of a wealthy, well-connected German-Jewish corporate law firm -- and for the first time in his life experienced the pleasures of money and position. Unlike today's law factories with their armies of faceless associates and junior partners, firms of that era took seriously the responsibility of training and advancing their young lawyers. In that more personal atmosphere, old Mr. Cook, the patriarch of the firm, became Dad's mentor and Dad responded with a filial respect bordering on reverence.

With his energy, single-mindedness, and ferocious capacity for hard work, Dad rose rapidly. In the early 1920's the firm sent him to Dallas to represent a client on an long-running case. The client, a southern gentleman, as a matter of course introduced the young lawyer from the North to his friends and neighbors, one of whom had a daughter recently graduated from Wellesley. By the end of the case my parents were engaged.

The annals of American immigration will seldom yield two families more different than theirs. Like my father's parents, my mother's father, Rudolph Liebman, had come to the United States in his youth. But there the resemblance ended. He had immigrated from Germany to the post-Civil War South, settling eventually in Dallas; he had followed the example of the three

brothers who had preceded him to America and established a paper-box business; though not much of a moneymaker -- once, at a later date, Dad had to bail him out of a business failure -- he lived as a substantial citizen, with the big house and servants typical of the southern middle class. He served his turn as president of the temple and worked in every civic endeavor. Mom grew up taking for granted the stability and mores of a small southern town but also the underlying anxiety of Jews in an intensely racist society. Like most German Jews, but with even more fear and distaste, these southerners avoided their ghetto co-religionists of the north. My mother, for reasons we never entirely understood, regarded them with an aversion that could only be called phobic.

Imagine, then, her reaction when, shortly before their wedding, Dad remarked that she would have to keep a kosher house or his mother would never come to visit. That hysterical scene set the pattern for our family relationships: no kosher household; no visiting paternal grandparents (my grandmother entered our house only once, at my wedding, and she ate not a bite). Our contact with the family in Brooklyn was limited to a few Seders -- wonderful occasions to us, with an army of cousins and a dramatic ritual that went on for hours -- and occasional stiff weekend visits.

It also set the pattern for what I now think of as a strange cultural life. Dad reminisced rarely because Mom did not want him to talk about his life in the ghetto. Except for a few

expressions so common that Mom must have forgotten where they came from, we spoke no Yiddish at home; irrationally, she contended all her life that German, a language she spoke fluently, had no relation to Yiddish. (Dad, who enjoyed teasing her on certain subjects, knew better than to set her off on this one.) They attended -- and I joined them occasionally under duress -- the stuffiest and most assimilated of Reform temples, Temple Emanu-el, on Fifth Avenue. My brother, my sister, and I all went to Horace Mann, a moderately progressive private school that represented a nice blend of intellectual ambition and old-money Protestant values. Only the Seders gave us the kind of positive traditional memories that most Jewish children of my generation grew up with.

Did I feel deprived of my heritage? The question would not even have occurred to me as a child. If I thought about it at all, I felt happily free from the straitjacket of a formalized, narrow set of rituals that seemed designed only to take the fun out of life. Yet I think I sensed something missing. The Temple Emanu-el Sunday school (yes, Sunday school) tried to teach us a version of Judaism so bowdlerized and emasculated that I rebelled at an early age and refused to go there any more. Dad tried other means of teaching me a little Hebrew and Jewish history, but I never learned much.

We had almost no sense of our roots or our past. Dad's mother had little to say to us beyond lamenting the sad state of our religious education; I avoided her, and his sisters seemed

equally uninteresting. But I remember wondering why we knew so much about our mother's family and early life and so little about our father's. We never knew that the stetl Judaism of his forebears had a warmth, wit, and strength of its own, and we could not learn about it until we had left home psychologically as well as physically. We also, I think, missed the chance of acquiring an important defense against anti-Semitism.

Growing up in the 1930's, I knew that people existed who would, given the chance, kill me because of my religion. Such a fact would devastate any child; to one who had almost no roots in that religion or cultural tradition, it made a bewildering assault on my sense of value as a human being. I could not understand why this insignificant fact -- that our family was Jewish -- should make any difference to anyone, since I didn't believe in or practice the religion. Something about being Jewish was making me an outsider, but it gave me no sense of belonging or pride. I felt like an outsider until long after the end of the Hitler era.

Nobody has ever had to convince me that knowing one's roots is important. Perhaps I became a history teacher out of this experience. Nor has anyone ever had to convince me that the fact of prejudice, whether one has personally experienced it or not, is felt as an attack on the self.

Dad became a Republican, surely an unusual affiliation for a man of his background but one that reflected his outlook on life and achievement. Like many self-made men, he tended to overlook

the kinds of help he had received -- the scholarships, the teachers who gave him extra attention, even the union that provided his father a living wage -- and focused almost entirely on his own efforts and achievement. Like many self-made men, he therefore had little use for government social programs or safety nets. The New Deal did not appeal to him. He liked successful people; failures made him uncomfortable. I don't know whether he preferred the Republicans as the party of the successful, or because they provided more help for his career, or because he found in their philosophy -- laissez-faire, entrepreneurial, rugged-individualist -- more of an affirmation of his own life.

Whatever his reasons, he set himself to become a major figure in the local Republican party, holding various ward and precinct positions -- state committeeman, for example -- and twice running for office. When he ran for Congress my sister and I, aged about eight and ten, I think, enjoyed handing out election literature in front of our apartment house, to the great amusement of the doormen. As his opponent had served in the House for years and controlled the district tightly, no one was surprised that Dad lost. When that Congressman died a couple of years later and they offered Dad the nomination again -- this time with a good chance of winning -- he bewildered us by turning it down. Today, looking back, we think he did not actually want to go to Washington and live on a House member's salary; he just enjoyed campaigning.

Competition gave his life meaning and pleasure. He saw

existence in terms of winners and losers. There was nothing grim about this; he loved all competition and competed in everything: in the law, on the golf course, in politics, and even with his children. When we grew old enough to eat dinner with our parents, he would often sit down, beam at us over the soup, and command: "Say something. We'll start an argument."

He meant it, too. In my preadolescent truculence I would usually rise to the bait and he would indeed argue with us as if we were adults, demolishing our feeble reasoning with as much satisfaction as if we were opponents in his beloved Harvard Debating Society. We did not enjoy this exercise; while it may have sharpened my debating skills, it made me uncomfortable with him. My mother hated this constant contention over unimportant issues but had nothing to say about it. Dad had the final word on this as on most issues.

He was a king in his home, the religious issue always excepted. In our spacious apartment on Central Park West, the household revolved around him. Mom's father had been a gentle but unchallenged German patriarch, and she expected her own household to serve its breadwinner in the same way. In big things and little he had only to express a wish: she would bring him a glass of water or overturn her plans for the week. In the last few years she has sometimes expressed regret that she never held a job or had a real chance to develop her artistic talent freely, but basically she believed that men did important work and women existed to smooth the way for them.

Dad could probably not have done what he did without that support. In our early years we hardly saw him; he worked late every evening or went to meetings or dinners, and came home long after our bedtime. Like most young lawyers, he often worked on weekends as well. Even at home he was only half there; at meals he often stared into space with his lips moving, and we knew he was rehearsing an argument or preparing a brief. When he wanted to have someone to dinner, as he frequently did, he expected to find it arranged with no trouble to him. It was.

He loved his children in his own way, but it never occurred to him that he might share their lives in any real sense. We knew no fathers who did. Normal family life involved a remote, preoccupied father, a mother who supervised the household, and servants who did the work and raised the children. People who had lost money in the Depression had to do without the servants and live in less attractive apartments, but the division of labor remained. A wife who worked outside the home would have disgraced her husband, and he would have found it unthinkable, even had he known how, to take care of his children.