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Never Again?

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Twenty years, I now know, is not a long time. In 1968 World War II had ended just twenty years previously. But for us college students the war seemed like ancient history. Many of our fathers had fought and defeated the enemy to win good jobs and new homes in the various Levittowns of America. Christians and Jews now lived in apparent harmony. If you stayed up late watching TV, at about 3AM the stations would sign off, but not before the "sermonette," fifteen minutes of uplift by equal turns from a priest, a minister or a rabbi. Things occasionally broke through nevertheless. Some movies: *The Pawnbroker*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Those documentaries some of us had the misfortune to watch, the ones with bulldozers shoving skeletal bodies into piles. And then there was the Eichmann trial. Eichmann was a vigorous middle-aged man, so what he had done could not have happened so very long ago. And some of us, mainly Jewish kids, but not only, learned a phrase. "Never again" was in some corner of our minds when years later we watched those screaming naked children running down the road fleeing napalm, or the prisoner with a gun held to his ear by a South Vietnamese official about to pull the trigger.

For me, however, World War II was much closer: it was my family. My mother, my father and I lived in a small apartment in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. They slept in the living room on what was called a Murphy bed, a contraption that was hidden vertically behind great doors during the day, and came down for the night. I, the hope of the future, had been given the only bedroom. From my windows I could hear the ocean half a block down the street past the boardwalk, while periodically from the other direction the subway rumbled by on the elevated tracks.

The neighborhood was all Jewish, mainly elderly Jews who could not afford to move to Florida and who, when the weather permitted, lined the street and the boardwalk in plastic and aluminum beach chairs. They spoke accented English and lots of Yiddish. The Russians hadn't arrived yet to turn the neighborhood into Little Odessa. There was also a sprinkling of younger families such as my own, who were known as refugees. The couples were in their late thirties and forties, considered old to be parents of young children, and typically they had one child each: my friends and me.

Often on weekend evenings, my mother would host dinner parties. The guests were all like us, refugees of a certain type: Polish-speaking Jews who had survived on false papers on the so-called Aryan side, that is, pretending to be Christian Poles. Sitting around the table after dinner, sometimes playing Polish card games, they would launch endless stories. "I was on the tram and some Germans started looking at me funny so I jumped off and broke my arm." "Some neighbor snitched to the Germans and we had to move out fast." "Got accosted by the shmaltzovniks [blackmailers] and had to give them my necklace and rings and even then they wanted to turn me in." "Two German officers sit down across from me on the train and start to stare. 'Sie sind Jude.' What do I do? I start laughing…and laughing. Pretty soon they pick it up too and we're all laughing together and finally one of them offers me a cigarette."

The only one who had nothing to say was Yasha. He sat on the couch after dinner and dozed. He had numbers on his arm, meaning he'd been in Auschwitz. "Him you don't ask," my mother instructed me. Yasha was married to my mother's best friend, a tiny woman who loved to recite long extracts from Mickiewicz's poetry. Yasha, who resembled a bullfrog, was uneducated. Theirs was a postwar marriage, typically mismatched, my mother explained,

meaning they had lost their spouses, perhaps their children, in the war and had married to avoid being alone.

All this was what they referred to as *wojna*, pronounced *voyna*, which meant the war. It also meant one half of my childhood, the private half. The other half was living in my all-Jewish neighborhood, where the worst persecution was noogies at the hands of the bully Buddy Eisenberg. Years later in a sociology class at Columbia I came across a word that was just coming into use: Holocaust. An awareness of that word and what it signified flowed underground and went to feed the fury that would shortly explode. Jewish students, after all, were everywhere at Columbia, though their connection to what happened two decades back was often still unconscious. But for me the connection was front and center. I understood that Holocaust meant *wojna* and more. Holocaust made sense of my childhood. It hurled it into history, making me part of something huge and meaningful – and horrendous. I had been placed on earth, however, for the sake of a different history. I had been given the only bedroom in order to make the future amazing.

Only sixteen when I got to Columbia, at first I would sit on the sundial at night and stare at the names chiseled into the façade of Butler Library: Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Plato. All mine, I would think. And then, there was history again, but the other kind, my kind: watching Dylan going electric at Newport, the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead jamming at midnight at the Fillmore West, flowers dropped into gunbarrels at the Pentagon, Janis buried in flowers at the Fillmore East. When I wired speakers for an antiwar demo on the corner of 111th Street and Broadway, it wasn't the speeches that mattered but blasting "Masters of War" down Broadway. These moments all pointed in the same direction and we, the longhaired kids who

called ourselves freaks, who smoked pot and dropped acid instead of swilling cocktails and beer, we were the vanguard of it all.

Every new generation looks at the world and sees walls around them. The natural response is to push because the walls are really in your face. In normal times, you soon realize that the walls are stronger than you are, you make your compromises, and you opt to be a responsible individual with a career and a family. But there we all were pushing together at the walls and all of a sudden the walls fell. And more, as in Pennebaker's movie *Dont Look Back*, some guy with a microphone comes running over and demands, “What’s the answer? What does it all mean?” We didn't know what to tell him. We weren’t leaders, we weren’t anything. We were youth. We shouldn’t have had that kind of power, but suddenly we did. We were handed the ball and we had to run with it.

So we took our demands -- Institute for Defense Analysis off campus, stop building the racist gym – and occupied Hamilton Hall. But the blacks decided they wanted Hamilton to themselves. They told the white students to go and take their own building, and thereby played out the larger dynamic of what was happening in America. The blacks called the shots, they were our vanguard, the vanguard of the vanguard. So we said thank you very much and went and took Low Library. Two days after that, a bunch of us dissatisfied with the liberals we felt were calling the shots at Low Library, jumped out of the first floor windows at midnight, sprinted across the lawn, and took Math Hall. I had gone home for the night and returned to find the Math Commune proclaimed. We were the ultimate militants, the vanguard of the (white) vanguard.

Proud of having become the administration's worst nightmare, we welcomed "outsiders," non-students, radicals from all over the city. This meant, first of all, Tom Hayden, who showed up in a white karate gi and who we immediately elected chairman. It also meant four guys

dressed in black leather, one even wearing a black leather cowboy hat. These were the Motherfuckers of the Lower East Side. They carried knives. They had begun as a radical arts collective called Black Mask, then morphed into a kind of political street gang that took their name from a line in Leroi Jones' poem "Black People": "Up against the wall, motherfucker, this is a stickup."

The Math Commune lasted four days. Boredom, dirt, fatigue, non-stop meetings, on one hand, but on the other hand, the palpable, visceral feeling that we were making history. The boredom was the eye of the historical storm we had fomented and that now raged all around us. Inside Math time stopped, outside it accelerated. We chained the doors shut, piled chairs in front of them, soaped the stairs, so that when the big bust came, and the cops finally made it in, slipping and falling on the stairs, were they ever pissed. We had scattered into offices to make it harder for them. Four of us sat on the floor with arms linked, but when a cop coaxed me up by clubbing me in the head, everyone else jumped up pretty fast. And then we were out into the night, blinded by the camera lights, hundreds of people chanting "the whole world is watching" and rocking the paddy wagons we were being crammed into. I held my head very high as the blood trickled down my neck**.** Over seven hundred of us were busted in one night.

In the aftermath, the line between liberals and radicals sharpened. Liberals put on ties and jackets and worked for Gene McCarthy. We thought they were ridiculous, because the system of American capitalism – with all its amoral might, with what it was doing in Vietnam where it was most graphically evident – was monstrous. Moreover, it had a monopoly of violence, and no monster of this kind was going to voluntarily surrender that – through ballot boxes or speeches or anything else. Furthermore, we began to feel that what we were after was a lot more than votes.

Standing on the corner of 111th Street and Broadway, catty-corner from where I had

strung the speakers some years earlier, I stood talking with a friend late one night. "Wouldn't it be amazing to change everything," I remember saying. Who needed career and family when you could have that! *There* was something you could dedicate your life to. Indeed it had already started to happen and I was part of it. Very soon, I was convinced, no one would be going to college. Universities as we knew them would no longer exist. And so I dropped out of grad school and moved to the west coast in order, finally, to "get serious."

The final flicker of Marxism-Leninism, this was a footnote to it, less revolution than its dream. We were without a party, we scorned all hierarchies, we were based only in small collectives. Our mantra was "the personal is the political" or in the words of Henri Lefebvre, who I first read in a cabin in the Massachusetts woods: "the *production* of man is the production of *man*." When I read those words, I put on Beethoven's Ninth and tears streamed down my face. I had become convinced that it was within the power of human beings to create a new human being. That human being would no longer be capable of building gas chambers. That human being would emerge out of arduous struggle both on the street and at home. The goal was to build a movement, one powerful enough to overthrow the capitalist system. But that movement would be of no value, indeed it would be just an "ego trip", unless it was accompanied by a breakthrough on the individual level, unless it was able to create wholly sharing comrades, brothers and sisters who would always have your back just as you would have theirs. Every aspect of life, seen through the lens of revolution, could make sense, could be rational. Was this any different really than living according to God's law, living as a pious Jew or Muslim? Only for us – and that was quite an "only" -- the authority was our comrades here on earth.

Our rulers would fight us tooth and nail, of course. Indeed, they would use any means at their disposal to defeat us. And therefore the need for a third arena of struggle, beside the street

and the home. We had to build an underground. Violence could only be met with violence. What we needed was a clandestine armed force, what some called a people's army. Personally, I was terrified of violence. When cops were coming at us down the street, I would flee rather than engage them with clubs and belts the way my braver comrades did. This of course proved personally fortunate in the long run, allowed me to survive when others didn't. But back then I considered myself a coward and a hypocrite. The best I could do was to encourage "armed struggle" by writing leaflets and articles, editing newspapers. My weapons were words.

All this vastly simpified my personal life. I didn't have to make disconcerting personal decisions, think about a profession or starting a family. Such choices were bourgeois individualism. And more. Living underground, and for a while I had to, didn't feel like a sacrifice. It came easy. It's what all those childhood stories had prepared me for. Eva Hoffman, a writer who has wrestled with a past similar to my own, mentions a writer of her parents' generation who declared that the Holocaust was the standard by which to judge the world. To which she responds: "But I think that the paradoxical task of my generation, caught within this awful story, is to get adjusted to the ordinary world in which we actually live, to acknowledge the reality given to us." I was finally able to do that, but it took quite a long time, so that today, on the threshold of old age, I'm the father of young sons.

But back then I was reading Bertolt Brecht not Eva Hoffman. My favorite poem was entitled "To Posterity" and my favorite line in that poem was “Alas, we/ Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness/ Could not ourselves be kind." Today I see that line as monstrous. Had we actually gained power back then, one of two things would have happened: either I would have been murdered or I would have murdered others. That was the merciless logic of "Up against the wall."

In reality, though, the dark pull of that poem expressed who I thought we should be rather than who we were. The comrades I was closest to were generous and sweet. When the sweetest and most generous of them was killed by police in a bank holdup, doubts began to rock everything I believed. A moment some time later sealed things for me. I happened to be in Paris when little firebombs began to appear in the pockets of clothing in stores that catered to working class people. Reach into such a pocket and you would lose fingers, perhaps a hand. Nothing on earth could possibly justify that, I decided. And more. I realized that from the anarchist bomb thrower through the destruction of "class enemies" through the righteous terrorists of *Battle of Algiers* and on to ISIS, I could no longer distinguish "good" violence from "bad". What then? Today, by way of Walter Benjamin, I can only say that in the 60s we were privileged to feel the rustling of the skirts of Messiah. He came close, made his presence known, reminded us of himself with the lightest of touches. And that's it, he was gone, leaving us to do our best in this fallen world which, I now affirm, may be the only one possible. So that today, amidst the renewed struggle that many of us have joined, the goal is not to replace this world, but to make it less fallen, to wrest it from those who would drag it through the mud.

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