

On the Sidewalks of New York

14. A Union Summer

During the academic year of 1946-47 I had been moving toward a more consistent political position. My work during the summer of 1947 confirmed that political direction. I knew my grandfather, as a cigar maker, had been a trade unionist. I never heard my father talk about unions. I am not sure that Loose-Wiles (Sunshine Biscuits), the company he worked for, was unionized. During the Depression he was happy that he had a job and never faced a long lay off. The Summer of 1947 I had opportunity to learn about trade unions from the inside.

The union offices in which I worked that summer were on the edge of the Garment District. They were just off Times Square on 40th Street and Seventh Avenue. The area south of Times Square was a district of old loft buildings where in the 1940s thousands of women and men daily turned out the clothes which dressed America. The garment district scene in those days was streets crowded with trucks picking up and delivering racks of clothes, people weaving their way between the careening racks of dresses and coats and suits being pushed along narrow sidewalks, groups of buyers and sellers standing in the midst of this chaos arguing over some business deal - this was the milieu in which I worked that summer.

The union offices of the Dress Joint Board were in a more ordered haven in the midst of this hectic scene. Local 22 of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (I.L.G.W.U.) was the union of the seamstresses, those who did the basic work of turning out the dresses that filled America's department stores. The local union was headed by Sasha Zimmerman, a longtime stalwart of the garment union. His local was a mix of European Jews, Puerto Ricans and African-American workers. Local 67 was the union of the cutters and the drapers, considered the more skilled tradesmen (in my day they were men), and was headed by Luigi Antonini. The workers tended to be Italians and European Jews.

Nat Minkoff, through whom I had gotten my summer job, was an official in the Dress Joint Board. He had assigned me to the Welfare Department of the Board. I was to interview workers who were applying for union benefits. If time permitted I was also to do research on the background of the membership. One of my co-workers was Roy D'Angelo, a student from Queens College in Long Island, whose brother was an official in the union. Roy was an amiable person and we quickly hit it off. From my first day at the Dress Joint Board I sensed that this summer's work was to be a continuation of my political education.

Within a few days on the job I met Norman Tischler who was also a student working for the summer. Where Roy was non-political, Norman was highly ideological. Norman turned out to be a most valuable informant. Norman, like myself, had gotten his job because of his political affiliation. He attended C.C.N.Y. and was a member of the Young People's Socialist League. Norman was Jewish and had the intensity of a person who had come up in the competitive educational system of New York City. He knew his politics first hand. I quickly learned from him about the history of the garment-related unions, particularly the inner ideological struggles dating back to the 1920s. He also had an intimate knowledge of all the left wing student groups which made up the spectrum of the student movement in the post-War era. He was helpful to me in sorting out the variety of ideologies which characterized the different student groups.

Norman was immediately intent upon recruiting me for the Young People's Socialist League (Y.P.S.L.). Young people associated with the League came to be called "Yipsels." The Y.P.S.L. was the student arm of the Socialist Party. In socialist history the party was known as the party of Eugene Debs. Norman reminded me that many of the members of the League for Industrial Democracy (L.I.D.) were members of the Socialist Party. This had been apparent to me since one of the League Board members I had met was Norman Thomas, the perennial Socialist candidate for President of the United States. Norm Tischler told me that since the League was virtually affiliated with the Socialist Party, I might just as well join the Yipsels. I told him that I was not ready to make that step, but I would give it consideration.

During the summer someone offered the insight that the garment unions resembled the structure of the industry which they had organized. As I learned more about unions this appeared to be a rule of thumb. The Teamsters, as an example, with their aggressive and corrupt reputation, were the image of the highly competitive and often corrupt trucking industry. Dress making is also a highly competitive industry made up of thousands of small shops. The small 'fly-by-night' shops of the industry encourages owners to operate in the nooks and the crannies of society. It is a cut throat business and easily prone to violence. The workers fall victim to the nature of the industry. The "sweatshop" with its crowded and often dangerous working conditions is the image passed on by the clothing industry. Efforts to organize the workers in such an industry, which is also mobile, requires determined and courageous organizers.

During the 1930s and 1940s the clothing industry had the reputation of being mob-infiltrated. In keeping out union organizers some dress manufacturers resorted to strong-arm tactics. Those that did often fell into the clutches of organized crime which offered protection from union organizing. Organized crime, in turn, created its own unions to supplant the legitimate unions in the garment industry. It was a lucrative business. Not only did the mob get its cut from union dues, but it also was paid by the dress manufacturers to keep the I.L.G.W.U. out of their shops. It was a devil's bargain for those manufacturers caught in the web of the mob.

The Daily News and the Journal-American were our family's newspapers during the Thirties. At a young age I remember the headline stories in The Daily News of the mysterious and violent deaths of union organizers. In the late Thirties pictures of Louis Lepke, the notorious head of "Murder, Inc.", began appearing in The Daily News. Lepke was indicted for running a hit squad which eliminated, among others, union organizers. From 1935 through 1937 the trial of "Murder, Inc." mobsters was regular fare in our daily newspapers. Thomas Dewey, District Attorney of New York City, gained political notoriety by winning seventy-five out of seventy-six convictions of the mob. On the basis of this reputation, Dewey won the Governorship of New York State in 1942, 1946 and 1950 on the Republican ticket. In 1948 he ran as the Republican nominee for the Presidency of the United States against

Harry Truman. Many people thought his record as a "crime-buster" and as a successful Governor of New York would be enough to out pace Harry Truman. Harry's whistle stop campaign across the United States took the issues to the people and carried him to victory in the 1948 election.

One vivid memory I have of the summer of 1947 was hearing in the street outside the Dress Joint Board building the wailing and the crying of a woman. The cries were loud enough to be heard above the noises of a busy office. The same scenario happened several days running. I was finally informed by one of the union officials it was the voice of the sister of one of the union organizers who had been murdered by "Murder, Inc."

The memories of her brother's murder were still with her. The incident made me aware of the importance of the I.L.G.W.U. in providing stability to a chaotic and crime-prone industry. The union refused to be cowed by the mob. It continued to go after the dress manufacturers who sought to escape the union. These manufacturers would often close down and move to another state, just keeping ahead of the union organizers. In each new location they would set up "sweat shops" and take advantage of another group of workers.

The Welfare Department, in which I worked, received the funds from the special benefits assessment which the manufacturers paid to the union. Beyond the union dues which the workers paid as union members the employers of organized shops were assessed a certain percentage of their payroll to cover unemployment and health benefits. Since shops were continually closing temporarily until they had another order, or were moving to another location, the union contract sought to assure that the workers would be guaranteed some security. .

Our Welfare Department had the files and the payrolls of the manufacturers with whom the union had contracts. The payrolls listed the workers for whom the manufacturers were responsible. The special assessment covered the benefits during the time of lay-off, and also the medical care services which the union provided. The I.L.G.W.U. had its own clinics. It also had a summer camp at which the members could take their vacation time. Over the years the union had developed special cultural programs for its members.

There was a drama training workshop in which workers participated. Those chosen for parts in plays would perform before the union membership. On the upper floor where the union executives had their offices, the walls of the spacious hall held the art works painted by workers in the art classes attended by union members.

Part of my summer work was to interview workers who were applying for union benefits. Some of the workers were seeking unemployment benefits during lay-offs and others were applying for specific health care benefits. We would check against the manufacturer's payroll to determine how long the worker was employed and whether the manufacturer had been paying the special assessment. The stream of people I interviewed was like a cast of characters out of Leo Rosten's "The Education of H*Y*M*A*N* K*A*P*L*A*N*." Hyman Kaplan, a figment of the fruitful imagination of Rosten, was a garment worker who spoke the English language, which he was learning in night school, with amazing and unbelievable creativity. Kaplan's fellow immigrant classmates at the night school added their own peculiar interpretations and flavor to the beginners' English language class.

That summer was a replay of the book. I heard more variations of accents and more unique spoken English than I had heard in my lifetime, and I had grown up in an immigrant neighborhood! The very process of interviewing garment workers was a green light for having them tell me their life stories. In the very process of doing my job I was getting special training in counseling. Of course, I added encouragement by my own innate curiosity in asking questions. Some of the more powerful interviews were with those who had been inmates of Nazi concentration camps. They still bore a tattooed number on their arm. With a practiced ear I could have played any number of dialect roles in one of the theatre productions.

This summer's experience made me even more aware of the differences between New York and Wooster. The population gathered at Wooster and the people I had met that summer were world's apart. I had come to appreciate my education at Wooster, and I had made many good friends. But culturally I was a New Yorker. Twenty years of life in New York and its rich cosmopolitan ethos, had shaped my view of the world. In New York life was

pluriform in the cast of characters it drew to itself. One respected the differences and assumed nothing about ethnicity, religious background or political beliefs of the people one met. At Wooster the homogeneity of the student body was evident in attitudes and accents. There were obviously people from different settings but even those who were different blended into the dominant culture of Wooster.

When I returned to Wooster after the summer's experience I had become more sensitive to nuances in people's view of social class. I found myself in greater contention about political party affiliation and especially about the role of labor unions in society. I began to directly challenge attitudes toward working class people and especially toward the poor. Only a few of my professors and those students who had become part of the Student League for Industrial Democracy provided an alternative to the generally conservative political scene at Wooster.

During my years in New York I had never given serious thought to any political party. I assumed that my family supported Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In our neighborhood Roosevelt was looked upon as a person sympathetic to the hopes of working people. The people I knew benefited from the programs initiated by the Roosevelt Administration and the Democratic Congress. Robert Wagner, our New York Senator, had come out of the 16th Congressional District, which included Yorkville. He had fought for and had been able to get legislation passed on the right of labor to organize, the minimum wage and the eight hour day, and Social Security. Among my friends we took this view of the issues for granted. These were obvious rights of working people and the poor.

But now I was aware that there were real differences in how people viewed who would receive the benefits in our society. There was a general consensus that the less government the better. Many of the students I knew believed that working people and their unions had had their day. The poor had been well cared for under the Democratic Administration. It was now time to take care of business and those who supported the free enterprise system. I had brought with me from my summer experience a clearer view of my loyalties and a political framework with which to engage the issues.