

On the Sidewalks of New York

18. The Election of 1948

After the Bill Johns/Marianna Paul wedding in West Virginia, I headed back to New York. It was early September. I had not been in New York in the Fall since 1944. Autumn is the season to be introduced to the city. The weather is temperate. People are getting back into their natural cadence. Whenever I think of New York in the Fall I hear George Gershwin's music. Gershwin has a beat and a rhythm which captures New Yorkers in motion. From the slow, desultory "dog" days of August we move into a September acceleration which gets everything back into high gear again.

As a young person I always enjoyed September. I liked getting back into the regular church program in the Fall. I liked seeing friends after the respite of summer. I looked forward to Sunday worship and George Buttrick's sermons. I missed good preaching. This Fall it would be good to once again hear Buttrick regularly.

The Fall of 1948 was to be action-packed. Harry Laidler had invited me to work at the League for Industrial Democracy offices as Student Secretary. This would require some travel. Part of my job was to visit college campuses in the East and Midwest to organize student chapters for the League. This was a crucial year for organizing. The '48 presidential election campaign provided great possibilities for getting at central economic issues. We had spent the 1930s in one of the deepest economic Depressions in U.S. history. Only a war had turned us into a full employment economy. Henry Wallace's presence in the presidential campaign provided an opportunity to sort out the differences between the Progressive Party and the Socialist Party. Socialists, or those leaning in that direction, considered the Republicans the party of corporate power and the Democrats still living off their New Deal heritage.

The polls were already giving the presidential race to Tom Dewey, the Republican candidate. Harry Truman, the successor to the Presidency after Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945, was considered a lightweight by the

political pros. Republican campaign jargon declared "sixteen years is enough! It's time for a change." In England the change had been dramatic. Winston Churchill, who had led the nation through a major war, had been defeated by the Labor candidate, Clement Atlee.

If change was in the air then we had to make the most of it in the United States. Those with democratic socialist views could hope for no such upset as happened in England. England had a long history of Labor Party politics. The Labor Party had been in power briefly in the 1930's so had proven that it could be done. In the United States, this election was the time to clarify the issues and to appeal to those dissatisfied with the two old parties. Most of the folks in the League would be supporting Norman Thomas, the perennial Socialist candidate. The labor union members of the Board, mostly from the garment trades, would probably support the Democratic Party. They were more pragmatic about their politics. Roosevelt had been good to labor. They expected the same from Truman and they knew the labor vote was needed to defeat Dewey.

Organizing on a college campus was not entirely new to me. I had spent much of my time enlisting my friends in the Student League chapter at Wooster. But that was a more familiar, congenial environment. It would be more difficult to make your case where you were an outsider. We needed good contacts at the campuses which I would be visiting. The League had the issues in its favor, but to connect up with introspective, searching students was my task.

Strategically, I recognized the issue was not to organize, it was to set forth the current economic issues in the light of the future of the United States in a world economy. We did not want to repeat the Depression. There were more humane ways to deal with people in an industrial economy. The League for Industrial Democracy had been dealing with these concerns for over forty years. Its leaders had written and the League had published pamphlets on every pertinent economic issue. I brought to my campus visits one other advantage: I had seen democratic socialism working in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan had been through the Depression and ordinary people wanted an economy where people were given first consideration. Saskatchewan had

put into practice in government programs what were the concerns of social justice.

Soon after I had returned to New York and had begun my work at the League offices, John Mecartney had approached me at a student function. I had known John as a member of the Student League, but also as one of the organizers in the Young People's Socialist League (Y.P.S.L.) The Y.P.S.L., pronounced "yipsil", was the youth wing of the Socialist Party. My first Y.P.S.L. acquaintance had been Norm Tischler with whom I had worked during summers at the Dress Joint Board. John Mecartney, like Norm, was eager to recruit me for the Y.P.S.L. John was at the time a Methodist seminary student, so he appealed to me on the basis of my own religious socialist orientation. Now that I had been to Saskatchewan and had seen social democracy in action, John pressed his case with more fervor.

John made his case for my signing on: "Look, Dick, you're already in the Y.P.S.L. camp. The Student League basically believes the same things the Y.P.S.L. advocates. It just a matter of joining with us in our common work. It is even more important now that you are working on campuses for the Student League. We can be supportive of your organizing efforts."

John's argument made sense to me. I had been considering joining the Socialist Party, through the Y.P.S.L. since the spring. After my summer in Saskatchewan, I had become convinced that's where my loyalty belonged.

I mentioned my decision to Jerry Pospisil, my longtime friend at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, who lived in my neighborhood. Jerry expressed caution: "You know, Dick, even though the Socialists are different from the Communists, they're going to label you. People are politically unsophisticated. There's no way you can escape being thrown in with the Communists. You should think about this."

"Hey, Jerry, I'm already there. I don't have to tell you what happens to working people in this country. I look at my own father and my family and see what's happened to them. Things have got to be different for working

people in this country. Anyway, it's in the blood. I'm just getting on where my grandfather left off."

Before I left on my visit to college campuses, I signed on as a member of the Young People's Socialist League. This gave John Mecartney a boost. I made two trips to college campuses before the November elections. I made one trip within New England where I visited Connecticut College for Women. Two of the students on the Saskatchewan trip were students there and they had invited me to talk to a liberal group on campus. The other trip was to colleges in Ohio. Before I left on my journey, I had an invitation to the highly publicized Madison Square Garden event which was to open Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign for the Presidency. Among my acquaintances was Bill Kosar whom I had met through Jerry Pospisil.

During my time in New York during the summers and on the holidays, Jerry, Bill and I got together for social times. Jerry had an old Buick, which was continually breaking down. But when it was in running order we made trips to Liberty in upstate New York where the Pospisil's had bought an old farmhouse and land as a place for retirement. Jerry's father, Joseph, was a plumber, a vocal union man, and a supporter of George Meany. Meany was later to become the head of the A.F.L./C.I.O.

The town of Liberty was in the midst of the Catskills resort area which had gotten the name "the Jewish Alps." Best known among the resorts was "Grossingers" which was made famous by the many Broadway and Hollywood Jewish entertainers who had their beginnings there. Our entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights when we visited the Pospisil's was to see if we could mix in with the patrons of the resorts and catch some of the celebrities before we were spotted as "goyim" and asked to leave.

Bill Kosar was an engineering student at Coopers Union whose family was of Russian background. Bill had two sisters who were active in one of the Slavic societies in New York City. Earlier in the summer of 1948, before I had left for Saskatchewan, Bill invited Jerry and me to the annual July 4th Slavic festival in Queens where his sisters would be dancing. It was held at a Slavic restaurant with a large outside serving area in the back of the main building.

The tables were crowded with families and old friends and good food. There was much embracing and excited conversation. The Slavic dancers were preparatory entertainment. They stirred up the crowd with folk dances from the ancestral countries which were represented in the audience.

After the dancers came the main event. One of the members of the Slavic society had just come back from Russia with special greetings from Josef Stalin. The speaker had met with "Uncle Joe" personally and he continually referred to Stalin in familial terms. He was there to convey Stalin's message to people of Slavic background in the United States. The speaker wove a very emotional speech around his theme of the deep familial attachments which Josef Stalin had for the American people of Slavic heritage. He wanted them to have large families, to do well in the United States, but to never forget their heritage. He wanted to assure the rest of the American people of Russia's peaceful intentions toward the United States, remembering the great war they had just fought together against Fascist aggression. The speech went on for a long time. The speaker next pointed to the economic plans which the Communist government had for the well-being of all the peoples of the Soviet Republics and friendly neighbors.

During the speech, Jerry and I continually made side glances at each other. We had caught the drift of the monologue. When the speaker ended, Jerry was ready to do battle. Jerry, who was of Czech background, wanted to talk about the Communist undermining of the democratic government in Czechoslovakia earlier in the year. He wanted to ask about the suspicious death in February of Jan Masaryk, the Czech patriot and head of the Foreign Office. But the speaker was taking no questions. So Jerry pursued him. Bill and I had a hard time holding Jerry off. This was a crowd celebrating their Slavic heritage and sympathetic to the speaker's appeal to them.

This was the climate of politics in 1948. Bill Kosar, an affable individual, shared none of his sister's enthusiasm for the Slavic Society nor for their falling prey to the Party line. The sisters had become active in the Progressive Party and were supporters of Henry Wallace's presidential aspirations. They prevailed upon Jerry and me, through their brother Bill, to attend the gala Madison Square Garden campaign opener for Henry Wallace in September.

The media were giving heavy coverage to the Wallace campaign. Among third party candidates, Henry Wallace was a substantial choice. He had served as the Roosevelt Administration's Secretary of Agriculture from 1933 to 1940. He was dedicated to the New Deal philosophy of Roosevelt and had formulated agricultural policies which won the Democratic Party support in the farm states. Roosevelt chose him as his Vice-Presidential candidate in 1940, then dropped him in the 1944 election. Instead, in 1945 he was appointed as Secretary of Commerce and continued in this office after Harry Truman assumed the Presidency. He split with Truman on his "get tough" policy with the Soviet Union and warned against getting into an atom-bomb race with the Russians. In 1946 Truman asked for Wallace's resignation and replaced him with Averill Harriman, former ambassador to Moscow.

The Madison Square Garden event would be an indicator of the dissatisfaction of the American people with the policies of the two old parties. The Progressive Party was a major effort at organizing a "populist" Third Party. The U.S. political scene had seen previous attempts at a Third Party, but without lasting success. The Socialist Party was the longest lasting Third Party largely because it had accepted its role as a gadfly to the main parties. Norman Thomas, who had run for the Presidency more times than any other candidate, could rightly claim as he did after the initiation of the New Deal: "The Democrats have stolen my platform."

Jerry Pospisil and I agreed to attend the Madison Square Garden event with Bill Kosar and his sisters. The night of the Henry Wallace campaign kick-off, the Garden was packed. We had to wend our way to the upper deck before we could find seats. The Garden had been set up as if this was to be a major fight event. Down below in the center of the Garden floor was the prizefight ring, without the restraining ropes. Joe Louis had fought many of his championship fights on that platform. It was now a just a square stage with a microphone in the center.

The atmosphere at the Garden was crackling with anticipation. People were sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for the big event. A series of entertainers, all supporters of the Progressive Party, proceeded Henry

Wallace. The most memorable was the presence of Paul Robeson, the renowned African-American actor and singer. Robeson had distinguished himself in the Twenties and the Thirties both in the theatre and in the movies. He had traveled across the European Continent, singing the songs of his people, the Negro spirituals. His reputation had made him a prominent citizen, but one particularly concerned with the rights of African-Americans. He had become controversial in the 1940s by his support of the Soviet Union. It was suspected that he had become a member of the Communist Party.

When Robeson appeared on the stage, the crowd broke into a tumultuous applause. It was as if he were the main event. The crowd noise quieted to a whisper as Robeson, in his deep bass, thanked the audience for their recognition of him. He gave a short message in support of Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party. The crowd was waiting for him to sing. Then as he began his singing, a deep quiet came over the audience. He moved from one Negro spiritual into another carrying his audience along with a voice which still had tremendous vitality and power. He brought them to one of his greatest songs, one which was freighted with all the agonies and struggles of the slaves of the South, "Ol' Man River." He sang it in a special way, changing the words slightly to fit the current circumstances. One could feel the empathy in the audience as he sang the lyrics, first as they were originally written - the hard life of blacks working as slaves on the levees along the Mississippi River - then with the lyrics which bore home the harsh realities of contemporary racism in America.

Lest Henry Wallace be an anticlimax to Robeson's powerful presence, the event organizers now used a light display to introduce the main speaker. Suddenly strobe lights, which I had never seen used before, broke out all over the Garden. The lights made wide and then narrowing arcs, flashing in all kinds of colors, giving a surreal aurora to the open space of the Garden. Slowly the lights focused in on the main ring and the main contender, Henry Wallace. It was a well-thought-out tactic. It concentrated attention on the reason for our presence at the Garden. There was a brief but ardent introduction. And then Henry Wallace.

Wallace was an accomplished speaker. He had warmth, and he gave the feeling of a person who had his roots deep in the Midwest farm belt. He was not an ordinary politician. He had engaged in and had supported controversial domestic programs. He was not a person who tacks with the changing winds. He knew what he believed and headed into the storm. He believed in a full-employment program. As thousands of ex-military personnel returned from overseas, he saw the need for extensive training and employment programs. If private industry was not ready or willing to employ people, then the government should be ready to provide jobs in needed infrastructure projects. Henry Wallace was still a main carrier of the New Deal philosophy. In the area of foreign policy, he would not be a "cold war" warrior. He was against an atom bomb race with Russia and sought to pursue more congenial policies with the Soviet Union. It was here that he was out of step with the times.

Among Wallace's adversaries there was the belief that he was being used by the Communists. They were getting their message across through him. Some of his antagonists claimed that the Wallace was a foil for keeping the U.S.'s guard down while the Russians were building up their atomic potential. I did not believe that Wallace was naive. He was a political person. He knew he stood no chance within the Democratic Party to carry out his program. Wallace believed he could shape a political platform that would continue the policies of the New Deal. He also believed that peaceable relations with the Russians were possible. As long as Stalin was alive and in power this was poor judgment, but Wallace was taking a different and difficult road. He knew he was a protest candidate and hoped to affect the political climate through the Progressive Party. He was using the support of the political left as much as they were using him.

My presence at the Progressive Party affair encouraged a sister of Bill Kosar to invite me to attend classes at the Thomas Jefferson School. She knew that I was sympathetic to left of center politics and thought I should learn more about Russian culture and society. She had little knowledge of the differences between the American socialist movement and a full-fledged Marxist-Stalinist ideology. She was becoming a "cultural" Communist, whose allegiance was founded on her Slavic roots.

I knew about the Thomas Jefferson School which was located in downtown Manhattan near Greenwich Village. It was strongly oriented toward Marxist-Leninist teaching. The curriculum, which covered a wide spectrum of current economic, political and cultural topics, was largely taught by those with Communist credentials. Socialists were taught to smell out the Communist Party line in whatever form it appeared. My curiosity got the better of me so one night in October I dropped off at the Thomas Jefferson School. I attended a lecture on the opera "Boris Gudonov." The professor played portions of the opera and then interpreted the action. I caught the full flavor of the class struggle as the professor saw it embodied in the opera. My Fall schedule was too busy to allow any more visits to classes at the Thomas Jefferson School.

As the elections drew near, I signed up to be a poll watcher for the Socialist Party in my South Bronx ward. I didn't expect any overwhelming swing to the Socialist Party in the Bronx, but my status as an official poll-watcher allowed me to catch the temper of the voters in my ward. Up until the last minute on election night it was expected that Thomas Dewey would overwhelm Harry Truman in the vote count.

When the polls closed down, the poll watchers from the various parties waited for the back of the voting machines to be opened. One of the Democratic captains read off the votes as they appeared by the name of the candidate. With great glee he read off the cumulative tally from the ward's voting machines. The tallies showed Truman with a substantial lead over Thomas Dewey. In his elation he forgot to read the votes for the Progressive and the Socialist Parties.. We had to do our own vote count. Norman Thomas, the old Socialist war horse, came away with a faithful eighteen votes. Wallace bettered Thomas by two to three times.

I took my vote tallies and made for the Claremont Hotel on the upper West Side of Manhattan where the Socialists were holding their election night party. The Claremont, which was near Columbia University, was one of the grand old hotels in that section of the city. A small circle of old Socialist stalwarts had gathered at the Hotel with an equal number of young recruits.

The young people were tallying the vote count on huge sheets of taped together newsprint as poll watchers came in with totals from their wards.

As the votes were tallied, it was obvious that the Socialist vote in the city was small. Total votes for the Socialist Party had continued to decline with each Presidential election. It was a story repeated in each successive election in the 1930s and 1940s. The New Deal had been effective in drawing off Socialist support particularly from the working class. Organized labor was one of the chief benefactors of the Roosevelt Administration and had been the first to leave the Socialist fold. This was to be the last candidacy of Norman Thomas. By the late 1950s Socialist leadership had decided not to enter candidates in the Presidential race.

The Progressive Party had a better showing in New York than the Socialists. They had picked up the dissatisfied Democrats and Republicans. What was even more impressive was the large vote tallies for Truman against Dewey. Dewey, who had been a District Attorney of New York City and a Governor of New York State, was expected to do well in New York. There was a small television screen in our meeting room. This was an accomplishment for 1948. We sat at our tables and listened as votes were being tabulated nationally. A tedious job in 1948.

The earliest returns showed a close race between Truman and Dewey. H. V. Kaltenborn, a noted radio commentator with a peculiar nasal twang to his voice, had in the early evening claimed victory for Dewey over Truman in a landslide vote. The Daily News came out with a special early morning edition with a headline declaring: "Dewey In A Landslide!"

We waited and watched as the night drew on into morning. The audience was continually changing with people arriving with tallies from far off Brooklyn and Queens. One tall sandy-haired gentleman came by our table and joined us in our conversation. He introduced himself: "My name is Vincent Sheehan." "You're the writer." I said.

"That's what I call myself, others would disagree." he replied.

"I've just read your book on Gandhi. You mentioned one of my friends in your chapter on Gandhi's death." I told him.

"Who was that?" Sheehan asked with increased interest.

"John Bathgate, he's my College's representative at the agricultural school at Allahabad. Our College has had a regular program there for years."

"Sure enough," Sheehan said with obvious delight. "I met John with another of your Presbyterian missionaries, Bob Alter, at the juncture of the Ganges and Jumna Rivers. We were there for the burial of Gandhi's ashes. This was a holy time for the people of India."

"I remember you made a great play on that meeting. The two people you would meet at this solemn religious event would be named Bathgate and Alter."

Sheehan laughed: "It added meaning for me. It's good to meet one of John's friends. He and Bob were delightful companions. They both knew India very well."

We fell to talking about Sheehan's visit to India and his interest in socialism. It was an engrossing conversation and I forgot about the hour. When I looked at the wall clock it was well after midnight. By the time I left for the Bronx in the early morning, the voting trends were clearly showing that Truman was pulling off a small election miracle.

When I arrived at the League offices the next morning there was an air of subdued jubilation. As much as the stalwarts had hoped the Socialists would have made a better showing, there was delight in the fact that gutsy Harry Truman went out and won an election in which he was the underdog.

People began calling this the "whistle stop" election. Truman had taken his campaign to the country. He traveled up and down the country speaking to small communities from the back of his train. Everywhere the word to

Truman was " Give 'em hell, Harry! Give 'em hell! And Harry "gave 'em hell" and won.