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**Editorial Notebook**

**A Long Lunch With Irving Howe**

**A Peaceable Radical  
Who Never Wavered**

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 about culture and tradition, politics and civility. He encouraged me to study economics — which I did — and Yiddish — which I foolishly did not.

"How would you like to go to lunch with Irving Howe?" a Stanford University dean asked me when I was an 18-year-old antiwar activist during the late 1960's. "Irving who?" I asked without embarrassment.

The startled dean described Mr. Howe as a visiting Faulkner scholar and editor of Dissent, which even I knew to be a leading socialist journal. As I soon found out, that's like describing Willie Mays as a jock who hangs around center field chasing fly balls.

I agreed to lunch — but only as a kindness to the dean because I anticipated another dreary lecture on political manners by an academic who cared more about university decorum than human life in Vietnam. We met at a hamburger joint and argued politics.

Actually, I spoke and Mr. Howe argued — barely containing his contempt for my ignorance of everything that he valued: culture, political discourse, and historical and philosophical inquiry. He weaved a vision of a socialist future achieved by democratic, civilized and respectful means. More astounded than accusatory, he would ask how I presumed to pronounce on, say, the economic origins of the Vietnam War when I didn't know a thing about economics or war or Southeast Asia or ...

But why, I asked, did he delight in bashing the left? The scowl on his face left no room for misinterpretation: He took no delight. He'd been a committed socialist his entire adult life. He railed against the stupidity and irrationality of the student left because such traits tarnished the glorious tradition he represented. He hadn't turned right one iota — know-nothing authoritarian strain had swiped the left's good name.

It says volumes about Mr. Howe that I took his inquisition less as an insult than as a challenge — an invitation to read and study with his guidance. We met several more times that year. I picked his brain, his sensitivities, his judgments. He had little time for Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown — the mainstays of the student left of the time. Instead, he'd talk about Georgi Plekhanov. So I'd read Plekhanov. He'd talk about Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, G. B. Shaw and Ignazio Silone. So I'd read some more. He taught me

Mr. Howe was at once a revered scholar and intellectual anchor of a important segment of the socialist movement. Add to that his accomplishments as cultural critic and Jewish chronicler. But to list components is to miss the person. Mr. Howe wasn't an amalgam of separate identities but a seamless whole. For him, democratic socialism was a cultural statement every bit as much as a political allegiance.

For me, his teaching also served as an emotional anchor. The late 1960's were frightening years to be a student — rocked by Vietnam War protests, urban riots, political assassinations, combined with survivors' guilt that we had a free ticket past the jungles of Vietnam. But to Mr. Howe, every political fight had a precedent, every political fad a parallel. Steeped in one's heritage, sure of one's values, a student would be less easily buffeted by demagogues. What Mr. Howe took from our meetings wasn't clear — perhaps no more than a window, however blurred, on the world of student heathens.

Irving Howe was a man of the left who fought the left — denouncing the violent, authoritarian strains of the New Left with a vehemence he once reserved for fascists. He battled to preserve the socialist heritage that was democratic even when those ideals were out of intellectual fashion. When I read of his recent death, I felt profound sadness even though I hadn't seen him in a quarter century. Those lunches didn't turn me into a socialist, but they set a standard of integrity I would strive to emulate the rest of my life.

Reminiscing after Mr. Howe's death, the dean who introduced us recalled a confrontation between a student activist and Mr. Howe in the 1960's. After hearing Mr. Howe say something kind about suburban families, the student asked by what right he called himself a radical. "I'll be radical long after you're a dentist," Mr. Howe predicted.

The student became a conventional lawyer. And Mr. Howe remained radical.

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