

Getting it Right

“I think the problem is that you will need to eulogize them,” my daughter told me. “What you write is just not going to be very interesting.” She was referring to a story I had written about my parents.

“Your wrong” I said, holding up the story, which had been accepted for publication. But later, when I discovered an archived newspaper article about the event from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, dated August 9, 1950, I realized I had filled in the historic void with my biases — the rosy approach my daughter had warned against. My account was imaginative but not completely accurate, so I pulled the piece. My editor encouraged me to rewrite the story, and to include the new information.

Now I’m looking at a photograph of my mother from that same issue of the newspaper. She is twenty-three, eight months pregnant, and third in line for arraignment. Philadelphia simmered in the late summer heat. America was at war in Korea, and Russia had the bomb. Paranoia about Communism was growing, and Joseph McCarthy was the most powerful man in America.

The evening before that photo was taken, my parents attended a meeting of the Strawberry Mansion Peace Club. I imagined they arrived with friends, the Rutherfords, an African American couple and their daughter.

But the *Inquirer* reported only one Rutherford (Ernest), twenty-five years old, among the eleven members present that evening.

They joined the others in Ned and Marcia Sheinman's apartment. It was on the first floor of a two story row house. Towering sycamores shaded the street side. A narrow maze of fenced alleyways in the back smelled faintly of garbage.

My father and Ned had been arrested weeks earlier for "littering" as they passed around pamphlets against U.S participation in the Korean War. Judge Sloan threw out the case, after calling the circulars — "poor and puny anonymities of addled and misled minds." My father was fired from his job as a navy draftsman the next day.

My mother loved to socialize before the meetings, and I imagine her making new members comfortable, as everyone took a seat around the dining room table. Anti-war activities, nuclear disarmament, and civil rights were on the agenda that night, and my father kept the focus on making decisions and assigning jobs.

Outside, two young prospective draftees had paused in front of the house. They could see eleven people in the dining room through the large window facing the street. They later told the police they knew Ned Sheinman was Commie. "Here we are, waiting to be called to fight in Korea, and there they are, rooting for the other side!" the *Inquirer* quoted one of the men.

Curious onlookers joined them and watched the meeting through the window. By the time a crowd of two hundred gathered outside, the two young men had left to shoot pool.

My parents heard angry voices. "Go back to Russia, you Pinkos!" and "We don't want Jews and colored in our neighborhood."

In my imagination, a window is smashed. My mother calls the police, and everyone moves into the kitchen, sits on the floor, and joins hands. The Rutherfords wrap their arms

around their daughter and speak softly to her, My mother sees the frightened looks, and feigning confidence, says, "It's going to be all right. The police will be here soon."

But the Inquirer reported that the call came from neighbors, and they complained about the subversive commies, not the racist, violent mob. The reporter wrote, "The crowd expressed very strong sentiments, but was non-violent."

I hear the sirens, and several minutes later sharp staccato knocking. "Open the door, police!" I wonder if there was a simultaneous exhale of breath.

But the reporter wrote "Captain Brennan rang the buzzer."

In my mind, I see an officer glance at a broken window and the terrorized peace club members. He spies the *Daily Worker* on the floor under the table. "Look at this, Captain." I see another officer grab the petition calling for a peaceful resolution to the Korean conflict, and a third picking up pamphlets with the heading, "AMERICANS WILL DIE IN KOREA, LET'S STOP IT NOW!" They hold a brief conference, then turn to my parents.

"You're under arrest for unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace," the captain says. "Don't you people know any better?"

I hear my father saying, "We're loyal Americans exercising our First Amendment rights." For emphasis he ticks off all five, lifting a finger each time until his hand is raised in the air. "Freedom of assembly! Freedom of Speech! Freedom of the press! Freedom of Religion! Freedom to petition the government!"

The Captain looks at my father's raised hand. "You Commies might also be in violation of the Smith Act."

Dramatic and heroic. But then, why did the *Inquirer* report that the group was *pretending* to play cards when the officers arrived?

My parents were handcuffed and taken out to the street below. There were several more policemen outside, chatting with the now pacified crowd.

“Go back to Russia, you Jews,” my father heard someone call. Ernest Rutherford heard worse. The crowd cheered as my parents and the others were put into two police vans.

Now, sixty-three years later, I am studying the fading image of my mother and the heading, “Alleged ‘Peace’ Supporters Helf for Court.” Her eyes smolder.

In my mind, my father says, “This time you got it right.”

“But pretending to play cards?” I’m struggling with this image. “It’s not honest.”

“Look, I had already lost one job, and you were on the way. We didn’t want to go to jail. Sorry to disappoint you. The verbal assault by bigots was frightening. Our arrests were unjust. Another lecture from Judge Sloan was unbearable.

“But the worst moment was when your grandfather saw your mother’s picture in the paper. Michael, you’re not the only one who has expectations. After the arrest, he wanted her to leave me and come home. He said, *These are times to mind one’s own business*. “She loved him and tried to explain why we took risks.

When we finally managed to calm him down, he said, *Marvin, it’s okay to be against the war, just wait until it’s over.*”



Ernest Rutherford, William Flook, Mrs. Barbel Thal and Mrs. Maria Schumann (from left), who were arrested at a reputed "peace" meeting, are arraigned at the 10th and Oxford ave. police station. Four others were held under \$2,000 bail each by Magistrate Elias Myers. Clerk of the magistrate's court is in the foreground.