

He Walked With Kings And Rulers: Remembering David Horowitz

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By Vanni Cappelli

Editor's Note: David Horowitz's dispatches from the UN appeared regularly in The Jewish Press for many years. Journalist Vanni Cappelli knew him like a grandson knows a grandfather.

What everyone will always remember about him with loving joy is his smile.

It is the exact same smile that captured the hearts of Metropolitan Opera greats like Enrico Caruso and Geraldine Farrar when he was an office boy at the Old Met from 1918, and is preserved in a group photograph taken on the occasion of the legendary tenor's last visit to the opera house shortly before he sailed back to Italy and died in the summer of 1921.

It is the exact same smile which shines forth in numerous pictures taken over the course of almost six decades at the United Nations which hung above his cluttered and picturesque desk. They show him greeting and engaging with the great and the obscure, the saints and the sinners, the statesmen and the journalists, Wiesel and Khrushchev, Begin and Vyshinsky, Hammarskjold and Netanyahu, Eleanor Roosevelt and U Thant.

That beautiful smile, warm and sincere,

which proceeded from a transcendent mastery of pain and loss, both personal and that of his people, first beamed at the beginning of the 20th century. It was still going strong at the beginning of the 21st, despite all of the intervening and continuing horrors that had confronted it, from the First World War through the Holocaust to 9/11.

David Horowitz, the dean of United Nations Correspondents from the founding of the world organization in San Francisco in 1945 until his passing at the age of 99 last October, worked next to my father, John Cappelli, in Room 371 of the Press Section there for more than forty years, starting in 1960.

I first met him in March 1964, the week I was born, when my proud parents brought me to the UN to show me off. David was 61 at the time, and I am now 39 -- put our complementary dates together, and you have a full, rounded century. A tragic century to be sure, but not without bright lights giving hope in the darkness. And one of the brightest was that, whatever else it was, it was also the century of David Horowitz.

'Kings and Rulers'

That it was going to be an extraordinary century was foretold in

its very first decade, when the rabbi at the synagogue where David's family worshiped in his hometown of Malmo, Sweden, placed his hand on the toddler's head and proclaimed, "David, you will go before kings and rulers."

Literally and metaphorically, this proved to be the case, and in his later years it was the "kings and rulers" of various sorts that would troop up to the third floor press section to pay homage to him -- Jews and Gentiles, faithful and unbelievers, advocates of freedom and supporters of tyranny.

There was a simple, compelling reason for this, and it went far beyond his venerable age or his standing as the dean of UN correspondents. It was that David represented, as no one else I have ever met, the ancient ideal upon which the world organization was supposed to be founded, and which it has so often fallen short of in its troubled history -- the Brotherhood of All Mankind. His own adherence to this truth was a constant reproach to the hypocrisy of the world body. Yet, incredibly, this passionate defender of the State of Israel was never anti-UN.

How could a pioneer Zionist who had first visited the Holy Land in the 1920's not be against a body that has hurled so much invective against the Jewish state over the decades? It is because the UN is supposed to be about dialogue, and David was always ready to answer invective with its opposite -- a calm reason based on passion. That is why everyone loved him, and everyone was willing to talk to him. And when you talked long enough with David Horowitz, invective became dialogue -- you just couldn't help it.

And what a list of luminaries it is, the people who talked to David! One of his most treasured possessions was the series of letters he exchanged with King Abdullah of Jordan before he was assassinated by an Arab fanatic in 1951. They disagreed on many points, of course, but always with a mutual human respect. "It is because Abdullah was the kind of man who would agree to engage in dialogue with a Jewish journalist that he was assassinated," David once said to me with a sigh when I was very young.

It was this almost spellbinding tolerance and friendliness that insured that no matter what petty disputes divided people at the UN or what inhuman arrogance decided that certain people would not even talk to others, everyone would always talk to David. And there was a powerful, human reason why this was so in the Tower of Babel on the East River.

"In all my forty years and more of knowing him, not once did he ever raise his voice in anger," says my father. "That was the reason why all of the other correspondents, even those from the Arab world who would refuse to attend a press conference given by an Israeli diplomat, would come to see, and talk with, David."

Catastrophe and Tragedy

It has been said that pain is inevitable in life, and that it is what you do with it that matters. It is perhaps the measure of the man that

David Horowitz's essentially transcendent nature proceeded from the tragedy that marked his early middle age and took his first family away from him -- the Holocaust.

Due to an unforeseen series of accidents David's first wife and little son were trapped in Europe at the outbreak of World War II, and perished in the death camps. This personal tragedy intersected not only with the larger one of his people but with that of all mankind. David, who had been born in the halcyon years before World War I and had always maintained his faith in human progress, had by the time he was 42 witnessed and personally suffered two successive, incomprehensible world catastrophes in which millions of innocents of all ethnicities perished -- general disasters compounded by the attempted extermination of his own people.

How is it that someone who had endured this could never once raise his voice in anger? How could someone covered in the ashes of his world emerge calmly offering his point of view to those who not only continued to attack his people, but his very conception of mankind? The answer can only lie in his strong belief in G-d and the ultimate beneficence and beauty of G-d's creation, summed up by David's lifelong motto: "Mosaic Law for One World."

Quite the opposite from being an affirmation of Jewish theological supremacy, this phrase was just like every other word and deed in David's life -- the opening of a dialogue. Indeed, he was the least dogmatic of men, someone who strongly cherished his friendships with Christians who shared his passion for biblical exploration and interpretation. At his funeral his close friend Dr. James Tabor, professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, noted that David worked throughout his life "to promote the ideal that the Jews should be a light to the nations."

And when one speaks of the nations, David meant it in the widest sense, for his engagement with others in the corridors of Turtle Bay extended to the representatives of the remotest corners of the earth. Some of the earliest memories of my childhood are those of David Horowitz engaged in earnest conversation, either in his office, in the United Nations Correspondent's Association (UNCA) Club, or in the hallways with men and women of all colors and modes of dress.

Unparalleled Knowledge of the UN

The combination of this incessant, respectful seeking out of the opinions of others with his decades of chronicling the official goings-on in the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Secretary General's office made David an authority on the world organization without parallel.

"He was the institutional memory of the United Nations," says his longtime friend, the Haitian journalist Serge Beaulieu. "His knowledge and memory about the UN were without precedent."

Inevitably, this meant that anyone seeking out David could get a detailed earful on the high and low points of UN history, whether it

was the recognition of Israel in 1948 or the "Zionism is Racism" Resolution of 1975. David saw it all, and could calmly put the two extremes in perspective. He also encouraged others to do so.

"I was for many years the correspondent of Paese Sera, a left-wing publication out of Rome, Italy, and when that infamous resolution was passed I called up my editor, Fausto Coen, an Italian Jew, to consult with him about it," my father recalls. "He told me that there was enormous pressure on all left-leaning newspapers to get in line and praise the resolution in their editorials. I answered, 'What are you saying? Not only is it wrong, but I have to sit here next to David Horowitz! How can I do so if you publish an editorial praising this defamation?' My plea worked, and Paese Sera was the only left-of-center Italian newspaper that denounced that infamous resolution."

My father's concern was not exaggerated, for sitting next to David Horowitz was a privilege which no one in their right mind would take for granted. I can still remember the joy of those school holidays when my father would take me down to the UN and I would be deposited next to David while my father concentrated on the morning's article.

A multicolored stream of fascinating talk would be directed at me, much more than even a bright and curious boy's head could hold: aspects of biblical archaeology, memories of Caruso, Torah wisdom compared with the spiritual teachings of other religions, recollections of long-ago doings at the UN and the people who had done them, advice about life.

The Grandfather I Never Had

David was the grandfather I had never had, for both of my grandfathers had passed away when I was very small. There is something that goes to the very heart of David's being in these kind encounters between a European Jew born in the Edwardian Age and an Italian-American Catholic baby boomer, and that is this: We are all human. There were few people at the UN old or jaded enough not to consider David their grandfather.

When I was first brought to the UN by my father and mother, David repeated the action of that long-dead Swedish rabbi and put his hands on my head, saying, "Vanni, you will be a fine journalist." I leave it to others to decide the accuracy of his prediction, but a journalist I became, and spent the last summer of David's long life covering the war on terror in Kabul, in the aftermath of yet another challenge to his vision.

My last contact with David was a few weeks before he died, when I sent him a copy, via his longtime faithful assistant Gregg Sitrin, of a piece I had written for The Jewish Press on the last synagogue in Kabul. This was in early October 2002, right after I had returned home; it will forever be a cause of regret in my life that I delayed in going to visit him before the phone call came from Gregg: "It is with much sadness and regret that I inform you of the passing of our beloved spiritual leader, David. He was gathered into his fathers

overnight.”

David was buried in the Sharon Gardens section of Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York. The afternoon on which he was buried was one of bitter autumnal cold, which compounded the mourners` desolation not only at his loss, but at the fact that he had passed away a mere five months short of the glorious 100th birthday celebration that awaited him at the UN. That event is still on for April, and will be followed by a joyous unveiling of his tombstone.

“When were you born, David ?” I once asked him when my own birthday was approaching during my childhood.

“In April, Vanni, when everything comes alive,” he answered.