

Murray Feshbach
Meir ben Baruch v'Leah
October 29, 2019

[Thank you: to Rabbi Jonathan Roos, and the Temple Sinai clergy team; to Rabbi Rachel Ackerman; to Blair Ruble and Harley Balzer, my father's colleagues, for reflections on his work and professional life...]

Of all the notes and all the comments received in the past week, with all the outpouring of love and expressions of appreciation and affection for my father, the one I am shaking my head at the most is the note I read around midnight last night, from a grateful former research assistant who, apparently named his kitten "Murray." Wow... Did not see that one coming!

On behalf of my family, to our friends, members of many different congregations and communities, Murray's colleagues and others: thirteen years ago I stood on this bimah and began with thanks for all you who were with us on that sad day. I open now with the same sense of awe, including to my father's friends, and ours, who travelled long distances to be here.

A very special thank you to Maggie Fredricks, devoted aid first for our mother and, then, our father -- and Vicky Hulcher, who managed his care, and became a caring presence and a crucial voice in our family conversations. And one more. To Julie. To my wife. Hundreds of visits, care and concern and being there when I could not be, or even with me... No one... no one could have asked for a better daughter-in-law. More a daughter. To Julie, truly, I could not have been there for my father without you.

To all of you: your present presence means a great deal to us. But I begin with an invitation to step back, a bit, in time.

Come with me, if you will, into the home in Kemp Mill in which my brother and I grew up. The clutter drove my mother crazy, but everywhere you looked there was something to see. The collections... museum quality in most cases... with Dad as ever eager docent, to show the stamps, glass bottles, Russian dolls, ceramic plates, century old cameras which at one point the Smithsonian wanted to acquire, artwork, artifacts from all over the world and his own painting, trains, shells, gems and minerals – to be clear, that was originally my collection – books, records (I will explain what those are to his grandchildren another time)... and an exquisite, lovingly cared for garden. My father was a Renaissance man, an expert in every field which caught his interest.

He was not... quite... a hoarder, but he was a collector from youth. And yes, he did get animated and agitated when he spoke about that very first issue of Superman, and how it was either lost or... permanently borrowed years ago. And yes, he could tell you the current value of the complete comic book collection his parents threw out as junk at one point.

For all the “things” in his life, however, he was not a materialist, or not merely one. He was also a great collector of people, of friends, of colleagues. I will use the word awe once again: the way people react when they hear I am

related to him, the number of accomplished professionals who say they were inspired by him, moved by his generosity – that word comes up again and again – his research assistants, those he made time for, those who looked to him as a mentor. He was open in a field where many people are closed, accessible and giving in a world of suspicion and secrets. For those of you who only knew him in his later years, times when he was so focused on caring for my mother, and, then, on his own needs, I hope we can convey a glimpse of this extraordinary man, an extraordinary life, and a family story which tells, in essence, a quintessentially American tale.

Murray Feshbach was born on August 8, 1929, two months before an event which would shake the world. I always called him a leading economic indicator of the Great Depression.

He was the oldest of two children of Benjamin and Lillian Feshbach. Telling people what... “country” his parents were born in was... not that simple. Lilly was from Przemsly, in what was Austria-Hungary but is now Poland. Benjamin was from Chotin, in what was then Bessarabia. It was Romania when Benjamin was born, then Russia, then Moldova, and now is part of Ukraine. He left at age 16, to avoid the dreaded decade long Czarist conscription of 18 year old Jews. To escape, he walked across much of Europe. His grandmother wanted him to take her with, to literally carry her on his shoulders. He declined, thinking that, at age 92, she would not survive that

long. She apparently communicated her disappointment with him by post for an additional 16 years!

Benjamin and his brothers, and their partners, had a fur business. For me, there are three things of interest to me about this. The first is location. The company was located in the same building, and on the same floor, as what are now the offices of *T'ruah*, the North American Chapter of Rabbis for Human Rights. Second, as Rabbi Ackerman knows but believes she is not connected to, the business was called Feshbach and Ackerman. And, finally, my family owned the company. They were management. My wife's grandmother, it turns out, was a fur worker union organizer. We have always wondered if they knew each other. We'd like to think they could have gotten along anyway.

But in thinking about how that business treated its workers... in contrast to many family shops, apparently Poppy Benny and his brothers did *not* want their children to inherit the business, or to stay in that line of work. It was hard work, and they dreamed of something different for the next generation.

To... encourage their children to put their ultimate energy elsewhere, they were very clever. They used all the male cousins during school breaks, and had them deliver furs in the New York City summer heat. Every single one of those boys reacted in the same way: hardly any of them *ever* got a grade as low as a B in any school. They all attributed it to the knowledge of what life would be like if they did not do well in school. And almost all of them, in this

remarkable family, went on to *tremendous* academic success: Herman was a very well known physicist, Seymour a prominent psychologist, Sid an expert on James Joyce, our aunt Charlotte a truly gifted math teacher, Murray a leading voice in understanding the former Soviet Union, and another cousin the porn king of...oh, well, um, look he was prominent in his field, too.

Education, extraordinary schools, self-motivated supplementary learning – for all of them, that was their ticket. My father never forgot the impact of educators in his life, beginning with the elementary school principle who crammed these first-generation Americans into assemblies, taught them basic values of citizenship and civics, and played classical music for them, instilling in many of them a life-long love of arts and culture.

Murray took himself to museums every weekend, from the time he could travel on the subway alone. He had a voracious appetite for learning. And he told my brother and me that you can be anywhere, but a book is a ticket to everywhere, any time you opened its pages.

Images from his youth: Charlotte, a junior partner, mistreated occasionally by his own admission, but right there, in, with all of his friends -- and friendly to this day with many of the same group, as I saw for myself at her husband Fred's funeral a few weeks ago in Florida. The city, its streets and byways were their backyard, and their inspiration. Dad writes about baked potatoes on fires on the sidewalk, honed mathematical skills with statistics from *three* home town baseball teams, played card games which required

memory – I still remember watching him play bridge when I was small. From the open bids he could tell which card was in every person’s hand. Rushing, running from school to cheder, Hebrew school, five days a week, where they were wrapped on the knuckles for making a mistake, but where first in was first out, to get to the pickup games of stickball on the street.

And the Feshbach house in Pelham Parkway, the first with extra space, a yard with a garden, first on the block with a television, headquarters for their group of friends and site of their Scout meetings.

Murray was... this may be hard to imagine from the past few years, but my father was fast. He was a fast learner, and thinker, yes, always, but he once moved fast as well. He played tennis for years, and was actually on the track team in college. His was already ahead; he was impatient with anyone actually finishing a sentence. He read fast – he was rejected from a speed-reading course once, told it would be redundant. He zoomed – he went through museums in a third the time it took the rest of us. Feeling pressured and a bit annoyed, we asked him what he could possibly have gotten out of it. Shouldn’t have asked. He recited back every detail from every exhibit the whole way through. And he was early, everywhere. OMG, was he early. I remember inviting him to our home, once, for 5pm. At 3:45pm, while we were out, the phone rings. “I’m here. Where are you?” We had to deploy Charlotte and Fred at our kids’ B’nai Mitzvah, to make sure he did not show up *too* early.

Scouts was an escape for him – it taught skills, and it got him and his friends out of the city. It was at Scout camp, though, on his 15th birthday, that, sitting with a friend, a counselor came up to the two of them, asked which one was Feshbach, and tactfully said: “Your mother just died; you’re leaving.” Lilly was 36 at the time. And, in a whispered conversation on the last day of his life, he and Charlotte spoke about her, more than I had heard from him about his mother in a very long time.

Murray finished high school at 16, set to go off to college... to be met by a flood of returning soldiers, all enrolled via the GI Bill. He began his higher education elsewhere, but soon transferred to Syracuse, where he dove into the study of history, and formed new friendships. He joined the first integrated fraternity at the university, famously inviting a fairly decent running back named Jim Brown to join, although he chose an African American fraternity instead. One fraternity brother, Marvin Kranz, is here today, and another classmate, Nelly Urbach, also with us now, greeting people as they entered, is a past president of this congregation. My father went on from Syracuse to earn a Master’s in European Diplomatic History from Columbia, before being drafted, a day apart from his brother-in-law Fred Wasserman.

What happened next is a tale I have heard my whole life and still find... amazing. He earned a coveted spot, one of three students selected from the entire East Coast, to go to the prestigious Army Language School, in Monterey, California. There, our government spent energy and effort and resources

teaching him to be fluent in Russian, a highly useful skill at the outset of the Cold War, and one upon which his entire future career would depend. And yet, somehow, immediately upon graduation the army, in its wisdom, promptly sent him.... to France. There, he served in human resources, and, on his own, picked up French.

Two weeks after his discharge, in 1955, he began work at the National Bureau of Economic Research, in the same office as his sister, as a statistical clerk helping American interests understand the economy of the Soviet Union. The work was significant, but so, for his life, was the leisure time. Charlotte apparently organized a running bridge game, every day, over lunch. It was Charlotte, Murray, one other... and a young friend of Charlotte's named Muriel Schriener. My parents got to know each other over bridge. And then...

To our kids who are listening, we support your choices, but this was a bit of a wild... well, there is nothing really wrong with this, except... I'm not even sure how to say this... They went on an overnight trip, on their very first date. To a New Year's Eve party, somewhere on Long Island. Mom's parents must have really liked Dad right away.

Murray and Muriel were married in White Plains, went to the Nevele Hotel in the Catskills on their honeymoon (which I *did not know* when Julie and I got engaged there), returned, packed, and moved to Washington.

My parents both worked at the Census Bureau – Dad for what would come to be called the Foreign Demographic Analysis Division, which I always

though belonged in the Department of State, but for its so-characteristic of my father reliance on facts, figures, data and analysis. They began their married life in a sparsely furnished apartment in Oxen Hill, using boxes from wedding presents turned upside down as surface space.

And it was there, in Oxen Hill, that my parents met a remarkable group of friends, who would stay together for a very long time. Almost all of them moved to Kemp Mill, the Millers, the Nagels, the Greenbergs... and I can see them still, faces from my youth, immortalized in that same corner of the pool, only this time in the swimming club on high, arguing, gesturing wildly, and solving all of heaven's problems just as they were all convinced they had the answers to every issue here on earth.

There is more to share, parts of a journey left unspoken, but I shift, now, from timeline to imagery, lessons learned and impact felt.

- I mentioned analysis, and facts. My father was a determined detective, able to follow crumbs of data to paint a picture which was almost always spot on. He foresaw almost everything in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: the rise of ethnic national identity, the decline of the Russian population through illness, attrition and slow growth. He saw the USSR for what it was, an empire with a mighty roar which hid a paper tiger.

- Research matters. Despite what we seem to witness around us today, real facts really matter. Besides his groundbreaking book *Ecocide*, of the population in the Soviet Union, his most important work was, probably, an article about infant mortality. After it appeared, the Soviet Health Minister had a press conference to attack it, and deny it all. The *Wall Street Journal* provided more than the usual op-ed space for my father's response. The minister was fired the next day. There are those who believe this interaction eventually saved thousands or tens of thousands of lives which would otherwise have been lost.
- Once, he made a remark off the record about the Soviet Union being, basically, a third world country with a bomb. A bit harsh. But then the line was quoted, publicly. On his next trip to Moscow, one of 60 or so such visits, somehow, of all the members of the delegation, his reservation was mysteriously missing, at every hotel they checked into. And only his. The group later gave my father a gift: a hammock.
- Another time, when in Moscow, he twisted his ankle. He was near the British embassy, so he stopped in, and they put an ace bandage on it. A day or so later it still hurt, so he went to one of the top hospitals in Moscow. As the doctor is unwrapping the bandage, he says to the nurse: "I've heard of these!" An ace bandage! And this is the country we feared for so long?
- My father believed in merit, in self-improvement, and in hard work. He was, in his own way, driven. Believing that memory can be

trained, he conducted experiments, subjecting us to tests... the Rudyard Kipling one, Kim's Game, briefly showing us many objects on a table, quickly covering it all up, and then asking us to recite everything that was there.

- He worked hard, and his life gives the lie to those who put down or denigrate public servants, or public service.
- He believed in credentials. Earning his PhD, through hard work late at night, was very, very important to him – he really preferred to be referred to as “Dr. Feshbach,” even though almost no other bearers of PhD’s I know felt quite as strongly about it. And if anyone around him should dare to cough, even once, he would immediately tell us to go see a “Board certified pulmonologist.”
- It often seemed to me that he introduced people by their resumes. Occasionally I had to intervene and say “Dad, a name! Can you get to the name already!”
- He was easy to understand, and filled with contradictions. He was a bit of a snob, who got along with people from any background, and in many different situations. His complaints inspired loyalty, devotion, affection, even love among many people... He “connected<” even through complaints and challenges and difficult times.
- His gaze was intense, inward towards himself and outward towards others. To meet him was to be subject to a barrage of questions, an

interview: where are you from, what does your name mean, who are you, really? It could be jarring, but his curiosity was constant.

- We had fights, and disagreements. Often it was only much later that I saw where he was coming from, or understood the way in which he was standing up for what he believed in. Growing up, I resented the restrictions he placed on our advocacy. We were never allowed to sign -- well, let me illustrate it this way. For years, on the outside of this very building, along with many other synagogues, there was a big banner, which read "Free Soviet Jewry." And in support of that movement there were marches, and there were petitions. But my brother and I were never allowed to put down our last name, out of concern that it would get him into trouble, limit his access, or hurt his career. I may have called him a few ill-considered names at the time. We had no idea how much he did quietly, and behind the scenes.
- I learned later on that resistance comes in many forms. In the early days of détente, when a new Soviet official first came to town, he invited them to our house for dinner. He would, though, make a stop at Giant on the way home. There, acting befuddled but in fact anything but, he would deliberately march up and down every aisle. "Oh, what was it that my wife wanted me to get?" And he would watch out of the corner of his eye, as the newcomer's jaw dropped,

and he or she began to realize that the picture painted back home, of a failed and weakened West, might, in fact, need some adjustment.

- He was an optimist. And he gave people the benefit of the doubt.

Maybe too much so. I remember visiting him in Germany, while he was teaching at the US Army college in Garmisch, asking about his many German friends, of all ages. He launched into a list of everyone's background, and all the good things they had done in their lives. At one point I think I interrupted him with the following observation: "Look, Dad, they can't *all* have been in the resistance!"
- Our biggest single fight was over his membership in the Cosmos Club. For most of the club's history it only admitted men as members. My father argued all along that it is possible to fight for what is right from the inside. But when the club voted to not have any more votes on this issue, I insisted that the time had come for him to resign. He had to quit over this. His response was, in retrospect, a very important lesson. He told me that in systems with an apparently hardened status quo, resistance to new ideas expresses itself most strongly... right before a major change. The decision to admit women as full members, with his vote in support, occurred shortly afterwards.
- He enjoyed life, with a gusto. His tastes were sophisticated, and simple, high culture and down to earth.

- He was a luddite, then a technophile – the last to get an answering machine, and then, suddenly, the first in line for the latest tech a short while after that.
- He had no stiff upper lip, complained frequently – and was the most unbelievably attentive, devoted partner, a hero and advocate for my mother following her stroke and its lingering, debilitating aftermath.
- He had a complicated relationship with teasing – a sharp wit, an whiff of humor... but an earnestness that made him not really able to take it, a way in which he seemed vaguely puzzled by anything more than light ribbing. But he was not a hypocrite; I cannot recall, ever, his being unkind to others, mean or cutting in a hurtful way. Not ever.
- He was clear about what he wanted to say, but often unclear in how he said it, employing double and triple negatives. He was fond of declaring that something was “not unimportant.” I spent one summer as an editor for him, working on papers he was writing. And boy, did they need editing. I remember one sentence, about the future fertility of women who had previously had many abortions. What he wrote was that they faced “an enhanced propensity to become an infant mortality statistic.” With the stakes so high, you want your words to be clear.
- And you had to unpack his sentences. I once asked him straight out if he worked for the CIA. I will never forget his measured response. He never, he told me, “undertook no trip to the Soviet Union which

was primarily funded or organized by Langley.” You can make of that what you will.

There is much more to tell, and no time here to do so. I hope I have managed to convey, in a small way, some sense of how special this man was.

A kitten? No, not, I can’t see it. A lion, though, that, perhaps. And, to borrow and alter a famous phrase, a lion who, now, sleeps.

In intellect, energy, vision, drive, connection, caring, commitment to standards, levels of expectation... and connection with people, this was an extraordinary man. He was one of those people who presence filled a space, and whose absence, then, is that much more keenly felt.

We knew this day was coming.

And it is impossible to believe it is here.

To Charlotte. For myself, and to Julie. To David, and Sylvia. To Benjamin and Daniel and Talia and Liora: may we honor his memory, and remember him well. *Zecher tzadik livracha*, may the memory of this special man, may the memory of Murray Feshbach be a source of inspiration, and expectation, for my family, for a next generation, for all of those he helped, all those he cared about, and for us all.