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This Old Heart of Mine
by stephen weiner

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When my father was a child, about a century ago, he and his sister were routinely beaten up in grade school for being "Christ-killers." The KKK burned a cross on the family farm in New Jersey. Partly as a result of anti-Jewish bigotry, and partly because of racism in general, my father became a Communist, which he remained for forty years. He volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The fascist army general Francisco Franco had led a coup against the elected Spanish republic and was soon aided by Hitler and Mussolini. In order to stop them, the Soviet Union called for volunteers from around the world to come to the aid of the Spanish Republic. Thus my father became one of the legendary "International Brigades."

My father was quoted in a book called *Rude Awakenings, An American Historian's Encounters with Nazism, Communism, and McCarthyism*, New Academia, 2011, on the subject of witnessing a comrade's death in Spain:

"I don't mind telling you that I cried when the stretcher bearers confirmed his death. He was killed instantly - I saw him and Dave Walba get hit It seemed almost incredible to me that Gene who was so lively and vital could suddenly cease to exist."

The author, Carol Sicherman, goes on to say, "The shock did not affect Weiner's commitment; he knew that 'if we lick facsism here, we stop its advance in America.'"

For decades, I was haunted by my father's extremely high state of anxiety. So were my sister and mother, and probably everyone around him. When we were kids, he was fanatically overprotective, it seemed. For instance, he constantly admonished us not to get run over when playing in the street. He was afraid that cans of tuna harbored ptomaine and botulism. One time when I was in college in Minnesota and he was in California (I don't think he'd ever been in Minnesota), I called him from a dorm phone and he told me not to fall in a lake and drown. Among my circle of friends and for me and my sister, this was cause for great hilarity; now I see what a terrible tragedy it was that he was so tortured.

You can see from the above quote that my father witnessed horrific scenes of death and carnage during the Spanish Civil War. He also volunteered to fight in the American army in WWII, and was wounded by the Japanese. To put it briefly, I now have no doubt that he suffered from PTSD, starting in 1937 and continuing for the rest of his life.

I think it is a great step forward for humankind that this condition is now widely recognized. Perhaps war and aggression will some day be reduced.

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Claude Lanzmann was born in 1925 into a relatively settled French-Jewish family. He survived the Holocaust and fought in the resistance. After the war he continued his studies in advanced philosophy in Paris. There he met Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and became friends with their circle and a lover to de Beauvoir. Along the way he established a noted career in French language journalism, traveled extensively, and made two films about Israel and the Holocaust. The second of these, a documentary entitled "Shoah," details events of the death camps, and is noted for using little or no footage of the camps themselves, relying instead on first-person interviews with survivors, both victims and camp functionaries. The film won numerous citations and is considered a classic of the twentieth century.

Following is a quote from the first chapter of his book, *Patagonian Hare*, Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2012:

"The guillotine - more generally, capital punishment and the various methods of meting out death - has been the abiding obsession of my life. It began very early. I must have been about ten years old.... Back then, as during the [French] Revolution, people were still guillotined in public. For months afterwards, around midnight, I would wake up, terror-stricken.... The violence of these nightmares was such that as a teenager and even as an adult, fearful of reviving them, I superstitiously looked away or closed my eyes whenever a guillotine was depicted in schoolbooks, historical writing or newspapers....

The truth is that throughout my whole life, and without a moment's respite, the evening before an execution (if I was aware of it, as I frequently was during the Algerian War), and the day after in the case of a non-political capital punishment, were nights and days of distress during which I compelled myself to anticipate or relive the last moments - the hours, the minutes, the seconds - of the condemned men... the warders' felt slippers whispering along death row... the prisoner, haggard, waking with a start... the handover to the executioner and his aides... the prisoner manhandled, shouted at, then hauled, feet dragging along the ground, to the door, now suddenly thrown open, overlooking the machine, standing tall, waiting, in the ashen dawn of the prison courtyard. Yes, I know all these things."

† † †

Dear Reader, by now you will have guessed that when I opened Lanzmann's memoir and read that he starts out immediately with this subject, I was astounded. In the more schizophrenic parts of myself, I felt he was writing directly to me. I've been preoccupied with capital punishment since about second grade when a movie called "I Want to Live" was released. It involved a woman who went to the gas chamber at San Quentin. I remember being horribly depressed that year; I don't know whether the movie caused this or vice versa.

This was in 1958 or 1959 in Bakersfield, California. The following year, my family moved north to Berkeley where the radical new left of the 60s was beginning. I saw it happen. One of the biggest causes of the progressives at that time was to stop the execution of Caryl Chessman in San Quentin's gas chamber. This led to the renewed start of the anti-death penalty movement. My parents sent telegrams to governor Pat Brown (Jerry's father) for mercy for Chessman. Millions of others wanted him to die. As the child of radical parents, I was starting to see myself as a revolutionary leader in third grade! I organized a demonstration against the execution of Chessman at the outdoor jungle gym.

One manifestation of my mental illness is the fear of being inadvertently evil, and as a result, subject to execution. That said, I am not a pacifist; I support the right to defend oneself. However, execution is too cold-blooded to be considered legitimate self-defense.

*I think my specific obsession with the guillotine came from reading Albert Camus. His novel, *The Stranger*, depicts a guillotining. Also, his long, impassioned essay in favor of the abolition of the death penalty, "Reflections on the Guillotine" features deliberately and especially graphic descriptions of decapitation. It made a tremendous and hideous impression on me.*

The second obsession of Lanzmann's with which I feel an uncanny affinity is his obsession with the non-existence of the world. Here is a further quote from the very last paragraph of his book:

"Along with capital punishment, incarnation - but is there a contradiction here? - has been the abiding obsession of my life....The spectacle of the world,...always relates for me to an impoverishing dissociation, an abstract separation that ... de-realizes both object and subject."

I, too, wonder how and why I could have been so excessively obsessed with the fear of death as administered by the state, and yet, simultaneously, have doubted that anything exists, including my own body. I have some questions for Lanzman and I may well write to him. How could he have done all the amazing things he did in his life? Why did his overwhelming fear not paralyze him? There seems to be a contradiction here, as Lanzmann points out. I simply don't have an answer for myself.

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American Haiku
by Dexter Patmon

In February 2010, NPR's erstwhile program, "Talk of the Nation", broadcast a segment about Six Word Memoirs, a feature of SMITH Magazine, an online publication founded by Larry Smith. To quote from his Wikipedia entry: "Smith credits Ernest Hemingway's reputed shortest story, 'For sale: baby shoes, never worn', with inspiring the viral literary movement." A story told in six words. Or as it has also been called: "American haiku".

Staraj, an amateur writer living in the Rogue Valley, heard this broadcast and was intrigued and inspired to contribute a memoir on "Talk of the Nation's" website. A few days later, he joined Six Word Memoirs, which he describes as a "literary playground, where people worldwide gather, as it were, to make social commentary, journal, display clever wordplay, vent, or simply indulge in whimsy on myriad subjects, mundane and profound." Herewith, a sampling of the six-word memoirs of Staraj.

I only discriminate against bi-facial people.
God dismissed wrongful incarnation lawsuit again.
Comfort the afflicted. RECRUIT the comfortable.
Gated lives brandish hasps of insecurity.
Open heart. Open mind. Open range.
Double contractions? 'Tisn't true. She'd've fainted.
Nurse terse verse. Worse? Curse! Hearse.
The Jung at heart cry, "Freud!"
John Doe thinks I'm a nobody.
Palace intrigue: Who clogged the throne?
Hegemony Cricket: "That's MY wishing star."
The voices say I'm not paranoid.
I'd rather have Bill Gates' druthers.
Jesus of Nazareth wore a hoodie.
The Grim Reaper wears a hoodie.
Trying for a whole in one.
I duck dynasties and goose democracies.
Reaching leaves stretch marks of progression.
The Wright brothers rose above critics.
No gene pool is without flotsam.

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