

Mr. Richard Liggeman, executive editor  
The Nation  
72 Fifth Ave.,  
New York, N.Y. 10011

7627 Old Receiver Road  
Frederick, Md. 21702  
12.25.91

Dear Mr. Liggeman

While it may be unfair to judge a book by any review, Peter Dailey's review of Gerald Meyer's "Vito Marcantonio" fills me with misgivings because in some respects it is quite wrong and I believe the fault is more likely in the book than in the review.

Vito Marcantonio was my dear friend. He lived with me when <sup>he</sup> ~~it~~ was in Washington for quite a few years. My wife worked in his Washington office for a while, too, when that office had a staff of two. We knew him as few people did and yet when finally there is a book about this truly remarkable man this most significant part of his life, in Congress, in Washington and in his relationships in Washington, <sup>all this is missing</sup> including with FDR (I drove him to his many appointments with FDR and we discussed while I drove him to his office what had transpired, ~~were~~ of no interest to his biographer.)

From the review Meyer misses the ~~so~~ essence of the man: he was a true, believing, practising democrat who, while regarded as a radical in those days, today would be in the mainstream.

What Dailey says is in some ways two-dimensional and in some stereotypical.

It is grossly wrong to say only that Marc was "an outspoken critic of the New Deal." He was on <sup>Sometimes</sup> issues its strong supporter and on an occasion of which I have a clear recollection was the only member of the House to rise in defense of Eleanor Roosevelt when she was under attack. The relationship he and FDR had, that to my personal knowledge they had, could not have existed if Marc had been only FDR's critic.

Marc was a man of issues and beliefs, <sup>a pioneer on environmental and work safety issues.</sup>

While in essence it is not wrong to say that Marc was "identified with the domestic and foreign agenda of the Communist Party" this is misleading in two ways. First ~~is~~ by preceeding what I quote <sup>with</sup> "thoroughly" when he had sharp differences and was attacked by the Daily Worker. And then the "identification" was on issues, not as a party-liner, which he wasn't.

There are simple <sup>of</sup> factual errors that in my mind raise questions about the degree of dependability that can be placed in the book.

When I knew him, beginning in 1939, ~~living~~ he, his wife, his grandmother and his mother and brother did not live in a single apartment on East 112th Street. He and his wife, Miriam Sanders, who headed Harlem <sup>House</sup> and was a social worker, lived alone in an apartment on the second floor of a building on the north side of 116th Street <sup>West</sup> of Second Avenue. While he did have coffee at Chiramello's (phon) cafe on the northwest corner of the junction of these two streets, as my wife and I had with him there, most of those he met there were not his "political associates." They were the people he represented and who

loved him as few politicians are ever loved. and I'm confident that for years he shaved himself in my bathroom more often than he "was shaved by the local barber."

His law offices were not "on East 116th Street" but were downtown, where Mike Pinto was his partner. *As I remember on Vesey Street.*

I never knew him to "downplay his opposition to Italian Fascism" and that he did not was one of the bases ~~for~~ for Generoso Pope's "Il <sup>Progresso</sup> Italiano-American" fierce opposition to him.

Representing his district as all Italian is to misrepresent it. It was largely Puerto Rican.

Despite his ~~being~~ being a minority ~~of~~ one he was widely respected (and feared as a debater) in the Congress. He was one of the few consulted on amending the rules, he was that much a master of them.

Marc, who slept on my studio couch, read late into the morning. It was sometimes difficult to wake him, at least a half-dozen times for appointments with FDR. He had diabetes and this meant food within a certain period ~~of~~ <sup>time after</sup> when he injected the insulin. This meant that we often breakfasted together in the House dining room. Literally dozens of members came and joined us, often with those who were with them. This is to say that on a personal level he was liked and on a political level his opinions were often sought, often by those who disagreed with him politically.

I was with him on occasion when the GOP Minority Leader, Joe Martin, of Mass., sought him out to confide in him what the GOP feared raising on the floor, ~~that~~ publicly, that Martin wanted known. *Martin looked to him, I was there.*

It is to reflect ignorance of the era and its politics to say that, after saying what is not true, that Marc followed the CP line on foreign questions, the truth being that often their views coincided, "he did not hesitate to reinforce it by campaigning against the Dies Committee's hearings on 'un-American activities'..." This is to say that FDR and many others, including his Republican Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes, followed the party line on that committee, not its hearings. Most of the opposition to the un-Americans was from traditional liberals and the labor movement. *So they, he, followed that "line"?*

While it is quite true that the Catholic hierarchy was strongly opposed to him this is in a sense misleading. Marc was strongly and emotionally dedicated to the canonization of Mother Cabrini and I can remember no New Yorker who dined more often with us than one particular priest who was always in clerical garb when he did.

It is quite misleading to say that Marc "was voted out of office." The truth is that the New York politicians who suffered so much by comparison with him and feared the success or popularity of ~~who~~ <sup>what</sup> he fought for legislated him out of office.

The deeply-felt love for him, while reflected in many ways, is perhaps typified by a widely-held belief in his district that he would be assassinated when he became the first

unopposed  
American ever to be the candidate of three major political parties, the American Labor Party then being the major party in <sup>his</sup> district and he having won both the Democratic and Republican primaries.

Marc usually flew, returning to his district usually twice weekly for night-time, not the daytime meetings with his needy constituents. (I was freelancing then and usually drove him to and from National Airport.) But that time there was such an emotional gangup on him that he could not resist. So, in a ~~black~~ Buick that may have been borrowed or might have belonged to one of them, an incongruous assortment of men who intended to be his bodyguards drove him to Washington. Not one was capable of really defending him.

One was the owner of that fabulous coffee shop. (My <sup>when</sup> what pastries he had and what a marvellous fuss he made over my wife, she was with us there!) His brother was one of Musso-  
lini's bodyguards. He spoke virtually no English.

another, also my dear friend, <sup>was</sup> the late Gilberto Concepcion de Gracia, ~~then~~ later head of the Puerto Rican Independence Party. Marc had brought him to the United States in fear of his being assassinated because he had been the lawyer for the revolutionaries headed by Albizu Campos. (I met the train to bring the last of the <sup>Nationalist</sup> group released from ~~there~~ Atlanta and delivered him to Marc at Marc's office.) Gilberto, of incredible eloquence in Spanish (but for whom I wrote speeches he delivered in English) went to New York and aroused Marc's Spanish-speaking constituents in the campaigns.

Then there was the rather youngish head of the CP in that district. He was having much trouble with his feet - some qualifications for being a bodyguard.

I remember Frankie LaMotte and I remember that one was a professional pickpocket. I now do not remember what Frankie was and it may be that the pickpocket was known as "Dzinnie de dip." Dzinnie was devoted to Marc, who understood that many of those who led criminal lives had no other way of surviving. (Dzinnie's advice I have not advised my wallet as a pickpocket in more than 30 years.)

(He regularly delivered those wanted by the police to the police, those wanted fearing being victimized by the practise of questioning beginning with being beaten up. When Marc delivered them he knew the condition in which he delivered them and the police did not risk beating them up. I remember one Saturday night when I had just driven up and parked outside Marc's apartment <sup>when William Biondi came</sup> ~~was~~ one of the leaders of his Puerto Rican supporters, was there frantically looking for Marc. He was hiding a Puerto Rican the police wanted and he just had to find Marc for delivery to <sup>protect</sup> ~~prevent~~ this man from police violence. ~~It~~ It took some time but we found Marc and made that delivery.)

With its jump seats that car held seven, there were six besides Marc in it, but I do not remember the others now. Marc was both amused, embarrassed and warned by their concern for his safety but they were a nuisance and he asked me to find some subterfuge by which I could get them out of his office and to my apartment. I do not remember what it was but they were with me until they all drove back to New York that evening.

I have personal knowledge of another of Marc's major accomplishments, not his alone but one for which Phillips Randolph is generally credited with it. Without doubt Randolph had a significant role but the political accomplishment was Marc's.

By the kind of finagling at which he was adept in the Congress and with its workings he had gotten the ~~glorified~~ identification of H.R. (or House Resolution) 1 for his bill to legislate fair employment <sup>work-places</sup> practises, to end discrimination. While FDR did not oppose fair treatment for minorities, he feared a divisive fight in the Congress. He and Marc ~~work~~ worked out a deal. I drove Marc to the White House for the meeting at which they reached the agreement - I believe it was FDR's offer that Marc accepted - and never was Marc as egotistical as when he returned to my old 1937 green Dodge parked near the West Executive ~~avenue~~ Avenue gate by the Secret Service.

FDR said he ~~was~~ would by executive order promulgate a Fair Employment Practises Commission if in return Marc would either abandon or withdraw HR 1. Marc was happy to get this much because he knew there was <sup>no</sup> possibility of getting legislative approval in those days.

My wife and I met when we both worked on Capitol Hill. (I was then editor of the Senate Civil Liberties Committee,) We knew many Members of both Houses over a period of years. We do not remember anyone as thoroughly devoted to his principles and beliefs and who made any more valiant and determined effort to be true to them. Marc was that principled. He was also both brilliant and witty, with rare political judgment and incisiveness, one of the many reasons he was sought out by others, in my presence in the <sup>and elsewhere</sup> House dining room, for his advice.

In part this is to inform you, in part I intend it as a substitute for an oral history.

It is my reaction to reading the review as soon as I finished reading it. I then regretted that there had been no oral history because Marc was so rare a man, so truly an exceptional and very human a man, and because as Daisy says correctly, he is largely forgotten.

There is no doubt in my mind that he <sup>would</sup> have been reelected as long as he lived, so great was the love and respect for him by his constituents, if the Legislature had not changed the law so he could not run in the Democratic and Republican primaries and then those two parties made a deal to gang up on him, both parties supporting one opposing candidate.

He deserves better that is reflected by this review and if there were a better remembrance available it might be useful <sup>to people and</sup> to other politicians not in the mainstream.

Marc was in every sense a truly great American.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg