

Ms. Lois Romano, Style
Washington Post
1150 15 St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20071

7/9/91

Harold Weisberg
7627 Old Receiver Road
Frederick, MD 21702

Dear Ms. Romano,

Your this morning's Style piece on Bernie Sanders triggered recollections of probably-before you were born, of when Ben Bradlee was a teen-ager. These remained in mind, were a major intrusion in my early-morning and later work schedule and will unless I put them on paper because whether or not they interest you they will in part substitute for the oral histories the president of local Hood College wants some of ^{the} faculty to do while keeping them so busy they have no time for them. (Perhaps at some future time it may be of interest to you or someone you know that all my work on the JFK and King assassinations, some 60 file cabinets and innumerable boxes in addition to about 20 feet of files already deposited will be a public archive at Hood.)

I've read the Post and am walking at a nearby shopping center by about 5 a.m. I can walk about five minutes before returning to my car and resting. Then I read, sometimes for pleasure, sometimes to annotate from my recollections or work a current book for a history professor friend. I am doing that now with a current revision of history I recall, Beschloss' hate-dominated "The Crisis Years." It is dishonest as most younger reporters, reviewers and book editors have no way of detecting about some of JFK's presidency, which makes it of interest to me, but this morning I could not put my mind to it. The remarkable man and his career of which I was reminded remained in my mind ^{whether} walking or resting. Vito Marcantonio is little known or remembered today and there is little likelihood that what is not in the Congressional Record can ever be retrieved.

"Marc" was a stranger to me when he was one of a number of Congressmen who tried to help me when I was literally framed by the House UnAmerican Committee. (Not to leave this hanging, in the end I was able to defeat them by persuading the grand jury convoked to get me to refuse to indict me and to indict the Dies agent who then, with Dies' assistance, copped a plea on two felonies. I had done nothing wrong but was writing a book about those McCarthy fore-runners. It may interest you to know that most of that research disappeared when one of those of whom you may have heard then known as "The Hollywood Ten" borrowed it to use in their defense. He, Edward Dmytryk, was the Judas in their midst. He did not give those records to the others or their lawyers and did give them to the committee or the FBI, which had denied having them.)

Marc, whose grandmother spoke no English, as my paternal grandmother also didn't, came from and represented New York's East Harlem, then mostly Italian and Puerto Rican. He began his professional life as an assistant district attorney and his political life as first campaign manager for Fiorello LaGuardia when he ran as I recall for mayor. Both

were then Republicans. When the American Labor Party was formed Marc joined it and ran as ALP for Congress and got elected. Genuinely and deeply concerned about the poverty and oppression of his constituents and about discrimination, when the Congressional pay was only \$10,000 a year he returned to his district usually twice a week, Tuesday and Thursdays, and in an assortment of store-fronts and second floors above them they stood in long lines to tell him their problems and ask for his help. It is remarkable how much help he was able to give them, most often getting it ~~for~~^{from} the city. They loved him for his willingness and accessibility as much as for what he tried to do for them and did.

Such farout things as one on which he helped, when a British sailor having promised to marry the young daughter of constituents refused when she was pregnant. I spoke to the Embassy press officer with whom I had a friendly relationship and there was a full military wedding and the baby was legitimate if fatherless.

Marc and I became friends. His salary did not cover his expenses. I invited him to live with me and he slept on the studio couch of my tiny living room in what then was close to a slum, at 313 H St., NW. It was a good location for me when I was a Senate editor because it was close to the then single Senate Office Building and even closer to the Government Printing Office, where I was often late at night.

Marc read omniverously, particularly about Abe Lincoln, and of those books I remember Sandberg's, and Elisha Lovejoy. He read so far into the early morning it was often a problem getting him up in time to take his insulin shot so that he could have the prescribed glass of orange juice at the House restaurant an ^{hour} later. Or to get him to the White House on time. I drove him there and waited for him.

He was maligned as a red, which he wasn't, and FDR asked him to the White House quite a few times. I must have driven him there about a dozen times. He had many friendships among other members and I can't begin to remember the number of them with whom he ate in the House dining room when he was with him. That he was the radical of the day made no difference to many members. He was invited to their poker games and he was consulted on the House rules, on which he was so much an expert he was consulted on their revisions.

He was so popular in his district that he was elected without opposition having won the primaries of the three major parties in his district. He kept getting re-elected until he was gerrymandered out of office.

Just about everything he stood and fought for that led to his being considered a radical became national policy. For example, while most blacks believe that A. Phillips Randolph is responsible for the executive order establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee, ^{which} for which Randolph was quite active in campaigning, Marc is the one who did it. He had introduced a bill to make fair employment practises a law. He had succeeded in getting it the prized HR1 identification that year. FDR feared it would be divisive if it came to a vote so he invited Marc to the White to discuss it. I drove him there and still

recall his elation when he returned to my old 1937 Dodge. FDR offered him a deal. In return for forgetting about the law he would appoint ^{by executive order} this commission. Knowing the law would not pass Marc had succeeded in getting the best possible alternative.

While I have no way of knowing, I believe that rather than disliking Marc for creating this problem for him, FDR respected him for how he had gone about it if not also for the principle represented. If FDR had not liked and respected him he'd never have invited him to the White House, and not only for those noontime meetings to which I drove him. I recall one evening social function after which some of the more extreme Republicans, particularly a mortician from Wisconsin, spoke harshly on the floor about Mrs. FDR. Marc went after them all, quite effectively. He was the best and the most feared debater of those years in the House.

I think that mortician was named Keefe. Marc had the House glugging at him with his account of how Keefe had eaten the lady's pretzels and guzzled her free beer at night and ~~the~~ was ungracious and ungentlemanly enough to denounce her the next day. (Her social interests and concerns were more advanced than FDR's.)

His wit was sharp and could be jugular even when light. One of these incidents that I recall involved one of the most extreme Republicans, Clare Hoffman of Michigan, quirky, too. He had his suit ^{tailored} without pockets, for example.

I had discovered that the Dies committee, which was largely neo-fascist then, and had ~~one~~ nothing at all about the domestic political right, including the pro-Nazis and pro-Mussolinis, in an effort to pretend that it had plagiarized a minor west-coast anti-~~XXXX~~ Japanese imperialism newsletter. Without correcting the primitive and incorrect English or punctuation. I had photostats (long before xeroxing) made of pages of it and of the Dies report, then an official House document, and gave them to Marc. He took the floor and that long before Joe McCarthy intoned "I hold in my hand..." and read samples of each, complete with punctuation faults. Most of the House enjoyed it but not Hoffman. He asked Marc to yield, as invariably he did, spouted something completely irrelevant, and then Marc responded, my paraphrase but close:

"The gentleman from Michigan reminds me of a ~~steam~~ ^{tug}boat on the East River back in my district. That ~~steam~~ ^{tug}boat had a four-inch whistle and a two-inch boiler. Every time the captain blows the whistle that tugboat stops. That is like the gentleman from Michigan. Mention Dies and the gentleman just stops." It got an ovation from the House. It was true.

I do not know that it will become true of Sanders but the leadership of both parties used Marc to do what they feared doing themselves. I was in on some of this. One that I recall clearly had to do with GOP opposition to some of FDR's policies they feared would get ~~us~~ ^{us} into the war in Europe. Marc also opposed our involvement, even after the attack on the USSR - until Pearl Harbor.

Joe Martin was then House minority leader, when he learned of what FDR was going ~~to~~

to help the British he'd give it to Marc, who he knew would use it on the floor. One of those times I was with them and others Marc told me about.

Marc, many of whose constituents were what today is known as the working poor, was very pro-labor. This included where the issues did not affect his constituents. In about 1940 he was trying hard to do something about what years later got known as "black lung." That far back he included asbestos with coal mining.

If ~~Cannon~~^{Sanders} ever becomes the parliamentarian Marc got to be he may have some influence. (Cannon was the House expert on its rules.) In opposing the lendlease bill before Pearl Harbor he got an incredible amount of time for the House to speak. as he did without notes most of the time. That, however, involved a bit of ~~black~~ blackmail to which I make confession.

Marc was certain that Hamilton Fish, the reactionary Republican who represented FDR's home district, would give him all the time possible. He also expected that Sol Bloom, committee chairman, would give him little or none. So he asked my help.

He used to call me "Files" on such occasions and as a joke when others were with us. This was not because I then had files. I didn't. It was a pun on the then popular movies, The Thin Man series, starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. Powell played a detective or investigator, Philo Vance.

So Marc said, ~~me~~ "Files, see what you can get for me on Sol Bloom so I can get some time from him." It was a snap. Bloom's daughter, a sculptor or artist, had accepted and not returned a medal from Mussolini.

Marc got a lot of time from the unhappy Bloom. And never mentioned Vera's history.

He was a minority of one. He used to joke that he'd hold a party caucus in the closest phone booth. But he was nonetheless a force for good and he did accomplish much good. He was widely respected for what he was, did and could do.

Mention of the UnAmerican committee reminds me of ~~what~~ what you may at some time find to be an appropriate story or possible magazine article. The man directly responsible for framing me was Republican Congressman J. Parnell Thomas, born Feeney but with a non-Irish constituency. Before Congress he was with a New York bonding house that, if I recall correctly, was involved in a real attempt to overthrow our government. This is recorded in two ways, at least one of which survives. (*Thomas also was a convicted felon.*)

One of the partners in that firm misjudged former Marine General Smedley Butler, then Philadelphia ^{D.} Director of Public Safety. He approached Butler with a proposition that he lead a revolutionary march on Washington mounted on a white horse. Butler's friends in the press included Paul Comly French, with the since defunct and then liberal Record. He kept French informed and in time French broke the story. It became a major scandal that, unfortunately, French's reporting career did not survive. Last time I saw him he was working on a WPA writer's project above a Delaware River wharf. He told me

but I not longer remember what was not in his stories. The stories themselves led to an investigation by the fore-runner of the Dies committee. It was chaired by the later majority leader, McCormack but it then was known as the McCormack-Dickstein" committee because Sam Dickstein, New York City Democrat, was vice-chairman and did most of the work.

So, whether or not copies of the ^{Philadelphia} record are still available anywhere, those hearings should be at the Library of Congress and at the House.

There are so many things in our history that get lost, more that are forgotten, that could make good and useful stories that young reporters have little or no way of knowing about. That many are preserved in the Congressional Record and in hearings does not mean that after the passing of many years they are easily learned about.

I conclude with a bit of trivia that may interest a black reporter or writer, in part because of the irony.

The Senate committee for which I was first an investigator and then its editor was known as the "Civil Liberties" committee. In 1937 we investigated murderous (literally) abuses of working people by the steel industry. One of those hearings was on a U.S. Steel subsidiary, Tennessee Coal and Iron, based at Gadsden, Alabama. Its chief of security, euphemism for chief of thuggery, was later famous as "Bull" O'Connor, the man who turned the firehoses and sicced the dogs on black demonstrators in Birmingham when he was its chief of police. ~~At~~ At TCI he was involved in the kidnapping and brutal flogging of a college professor who spoke for equality. Joe Gelders, who had been left in a woods for dead, ^{but} survived. as a witness he displayed the permanent scars and welts on his upper body. Some qualifications for being a chief of police! But in the end he was self-defeating because of the reaction to those televised Birmingham abuses.

I have those hearings, by the way, and the same set includes those we held on "Bloody Harlan" County, Kentucky. My was it bloody! And evil in so many ways, some rather unusual and improbable but quite true.

If I've taken you time with what does not interest you, I apologize. My other purpose was a partial substitute for an oral history.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg