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Meyer Brownstone

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Meyer Brownstone: Erving Should Not Be Judged in Any Way and Certainly Not by Students Who Saw or Knew Very Little of Goff

Myer Brownstone wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and approved adding the present version to the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 07-02-09]

July 2, 2009

Hello Dmitri:

I did have notice from Saul Cherniack about your interest in Erving Goffman's background. I cannot contribute a great deal since our relationship (face to face) was largely during our high school years and earlier in Winnipeg. Let me say immediately that Jack Ludwig should be a better source since he had more contact with Goff in their years in the United States. I have kept up contact with Jack since childhood days and he came to my 80th birthday here in Toronto. I have two very similar Emails for him < . . . > and have often had trouble with sending mail to him.

At any rate please give Frances my love -- I knew her very briefly in Winnipeg. As a very young working class child Frances was a very almost mystical magical figure -- a glamorous actress of the sort I could only see on the screen in the old College Theatre in Winnipeg. As to Goff well here are some of my recollections of many years ago:

1. As part of a group of young Jewish kids in Winnipeg he was the least in evidence at our frequent meetings casual and more formal. In short I would almost characterize him as a recluse -- lovable but a recluse.
2. Most of us were engaged energetically in sports and other activities in the community. Most of us attended parochial Jewish schools of one political sort or another -- from anarchist to socialist. Goff did none of this to the best of my recollections. He was an avid reader as I was but I am sure he was much more advanced in the material he was reading. My advantage was reading marvelous Jewish texts.
3. Some of us including myself were involved from a young age in one type of radical political movement or another -- I was involved and still am in socialism as it evolves into modern realities. I cannot recall any involvement

on Goff's part. Indeed I do not recall any political discussion with him or even statements from him. In class terms most of us were in working class families, often on welfare and often in various jobs as children and young adults. The Goffman's would be regarded as "bourgeois" in the old lingo but this did not constitute a barrier of our friendship.

4. His favorite way of spending time was to listen to Wagner at home, alone and in the dark. In contrast I loved music but not Wagner and not listening to it in his manner but always during my study and reading periods (as you can see I am inserting myself frequently as an attempt to provide a richer profile of Goff.)

5. Our one great joint effort was in our high school (St. John's Tech) production one year of Hamlet. We were the gravediggers who were to appear in a rather drunken state drinking liquor on stage. We were provided with a bottle of "Wynola" -- a Jewish answer to the more expensive Coca Cola. In fact I managed to put some booze in the bottle -- of course for the sake of authenticity so we have a rollicking good time of it "Alas poor Yorick" but fun for Goff and Meyer. The other funny memory is going to the movies with Goff. On one occasion which I remember vividly he had purchased a bag of coffee to take home later which we sniffed throughout the movie (better than gasoline isn't it or is it equally addictive?). But the fun was provided by Goff. As usual it was a cowboy movie. The charge, incidentally, during the depression was 10 cents plus a free pass to next week's film. The funny part was that every time there was violence and death of which there was plenty Goff would roar with laughter until I joined in and we were almost thrown out as the rest of the viewers reacted somewhat more seriously to these dastardly events. Years later I was reminded of this when I visited an Indian reservation in the North again watching a cowboy movie in which Indians were being slaughtered. The local Indian population virtually repeated Goff's performance by roaring with laughter at this display of white superiority and fictional representation which neglected the great Indian warrior tradition and the white scalps displayed in the local museum!

6. I last saw Goff in the 60's when I was a research director of a Canadian Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism and doing some research visits to Philadelphia where Goff was at the time. I tracked him down, called him and he arranged for a dinner, not at a "proper" restaurant but some delicatessen sort of restaurant or other. I will never know if Goff intended to take us back to our youth with this strange encounter but it was very subdued and to my disappointment overly quiet. Of course I had known of Goff's family tragedy and of his flitting between the heads in the Hebrides and the gambling tables at Los Vegas where they barred him because he was much too smart for them.

7. Well that is about it. My late sister spent time with Goff in Toronto as did many of my Winnipeg Pals all attending the University of Toronto. I stayed on the Prairies, using my army gratuity to attend graduate school in Minnesota and then moving on to Saskatchewan which had elected a socialist government and I spent the next 17 years living out my dreams in a socialist state -- the home of medicare and other great projects. Academically Goff and I ran almost in parallel except for the years in Saskatchewan. I took my Ph.D. at Harvard during that period and ultimately left my bureaucratic career for academia at the Universities of Toronto and York in political science and environmental studies respectively. But unlike Goff who wrote some marvelous books and articles I kept up my political activism outside the University, wrote a great deal but not in the academic mode plus the universities tended to capitalize on my substantial bureaucratic and research experience by asking me to undertake many administrative tasks classically loathed by academics (i.e. publish or perish which I ignored almost entirely).

8. I hesitate with this final bit because it is second hand and I cannot verify as its accuracy. But by coincidence as research director on the above Commission several of Goff's students who had studied with him in California were in his classroom when the tragedy of his wife's death was announced. They reported that Goff walked into the classroom and just went on with his next lecture. Those students were great admirers of Goff as a teacher, researcher and writer and asked me to explain what they considered a very puzzling and for them negative response to a personal tragedy. I did not attempt to explain but recounted to them my own memories of Goff as a warm and feeling friend who should not be judged in any way and certainly not by students who saw or knew very little of Goff as a very unusual and gifted person.

Well I don't think I can say much more and I apologize if too much of me appears in this letter. I was never happy with Goff's apparent fascination with Las Vegas and the stock market in particular something which he shared with none of our old Winnipeg group but it does not change at all my respect and love for the person and his work.

I do hope all of this is of relevance and interest and would be happy to respond further if necessary. I thank you for undertaking this work and wish you success in this exploration of a truly remarkable North Winnipegger as he will always remain in my memory,

warm regards

meyer

p.s. The other old friends of Goff whom I can remember-my beloved sister, Hannah Hirt, her husband Norman Hirt, Bob Adamson, David Levin, Rube Simkin, Charlie Greenberg, Tom Taylor and others less closely connected are all deceased. Bob's sister Ginny who migrated to California many years ago and may have known Goff there is alive as far as I know but unhappily I cannot remember her married name except that it is Jewish and rather complicated but she may still be using the Adamson name.