

Eulogy for Harry Pinker

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Everyone who knew Harry Pinker describes him as a man with integrity, a sweet nature, a gratitude for life's blessings, an unflappability in the face of setbacks, and an unslakeable thirst for experience. He was also a gifted wordsmith, a talent that easily could go unappreciated in a family in which it is hard to get a word in edgewise. Here is his voice, beginning the story of his life with Roz as he told it at their 50th anniversary celebration:

“1950 was a very good year. I had received my acceptance into law school, and had been engaged as head counselor of a summer camp in the Laurentian Mountains [the place he met Roz]. I also learned how to drive. You see, Schmaia Leibowitz, the director of Camp Tekumah, knew more about Jewish education than he did about physics. He went to find a gas leak in the oven using a lighted match. I had to drive him to the hospital in Ste Agathe, 20 miles away. I had never driven before.”

Which captures exactly the way he learned everything in life. Dad was incorrigibly undaunted when faced with the opportunity to try something new, and this led to many unforgettable childhood experiences. I know that Susan and Rob will recount their favorites, so I'll just mention three, about which perhaps the less said the better: the time we attempted to make boomerangs; a trip to Gaspé to try out the local pastime of fishing for a species called “crapaud”; and the family's one-day visit to a nudist colony.

Dad's appetite for novel experiences was far from frivolous. He was probably the first person in this room to buy a personal computer, despite ridicule from friends and family who said he was just indulging in his love of gadgets, a passion he shared with his beloved brothers-in-law Barry and Mark Wiesenfeld. After all, said everyone in 1980, who on earth actually needs *his own computer*? And his lust for travel took him to Berlin in 1989, where he was present at the demolition of the Wall and proudly posed for a photo chiseling off a chunk.

Dad's upbeat nature came not from a childhood filled with good fortune but from an appreciation of the fortune he did enjoy. Here he is reminiscing about a family whose name he had deciphered on a broken gravestone in an overgrown Jewish cemetery in Krasnystaw, the birthplace of his parents, after Rebecca and I had invited them to join us on a trip to Poland:

"The whole family was fine, and cared about me when I was a child. Two memories: One: My mother, who liked few people, liked them a great deal. Two: The old lady was horrified that I was out in the cold during the Montreal winter without gloves or mittens. She knitted me gloves every winter for years. In a childhood that was very deprived, she was one of the few people who was good to me. I remember her fondly."

As Dad's powers contracted with age, his eloquence and his appreciation of life were undiminished. Here he is speaking at their 60th anniversary celebration a year and a half ago:

“IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENTIRE FAMILY, ALL THOSE I HOLD DEAR, I WOULD LIKE TO PROPOSE A TOAST TO THE WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN THE LOVE OF MY LIFE FOR OVER 60 YEARS.

FOR OVER HALF A CENTURY SHE HAS BEEN MY SOUL MATE, MY NURSE.

[He could have added, “and my cardiologist, oncologist, neurologist and urologist.”]

SHE HAS BEEN MY TEACHER, MY COUNSELLOR, AND MY SUPPORTER THROUGH THICK AND THIN.

EVERYONE WHO KNOWS HER CONSIDERS HER TO BE STRONG, WITTY, SMART, INTELLECTUAL, AND INTERESTING TO BE WITH. I DO, TOO.”

Though Jewish identity was important to my father, he was not what anyone would call a religious man. Yet late in life he adopted a custom with a special meaning to him. During the seven stolen summers in which he and my mother joined Rebecca and me for a few days in the Berkshires, he began every dinner by holding up his glass, and with a twinkle that told us this was no mere ritual, no formulaic incantation, said, “L’chayim.”