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Brownsville

Norman Podhoretz was born on January 16, 1930, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York. His father, Julius Podhoretz, had come to America in 1912 at age sixteen, his mother Helen in 1920 at age seventeen. They were distant cousins, introduced by relatives in America. Nearly everyone in the extended family entered into traditionally brokered wedlock with some cousin or other,[1] but the Julius–Helen marriage in 1923 was a newfangled love-match. The family came from Galicia, which during World War I had been conquered by Cossacks and occupied by Russians. Helen, the oldest of five children, had to take care of everyone, including her mother, "a useless woman" who, Podhoretz has written, "made a habit of passing out every Friday night before the onset of the Sabbath, thereby leaving my humiliated but brassy preteen mother to run shouting through the village, 'Mama just fainted again, please come help.'" The anecdote gives a glimpse of the travails undergone by a girl whose father ("a mean prick," according to his grandson) had emigrated to America just before the war broke out.[2]

The "prick" was M'shitzik Woliner, "a *bayzer Yid*, an angry Jew," a Hasid who never smiled. He grew more devout with age, and Norman would later joke that "since the 613 commandments binding upon a pious Jew were not enough for him, he had invented new ones, like a prohibition against whistling, which he was firmly convinced had been ordained by God." Reunited in America, M'shitzik and his wife Esther (née Malkah) lived together in "a loathing so intense that [they] literally ceased speaking to each other until death did them part."

When Norman's paternal grandfather, Yidl Podhoretz, came to America, he didn't change his family name, though it is difficult for most people to pronounce. (The right way is Pod-hór-etz, aspirating the "h."[3]) In Europe he had married a girl named Runyeh, who bore him five sons, including Julius. In America, however, Yidl and Runyeh separated, mainly because of the suicide of her sister, for which Runyeh held Yidl responsible. So she walked out with her youngest son and all her pots and pans, and moved without invitation into

FIGURE 1. Julius and Helen Podhoretz at their wedding, 1923.

Norman's parents' small apartment. The guilt-laden, abandoned Yidl would take the trolley from lower Manhattan to Brooklyn and, according to Norman, would lurk "across the street from our apartment building in order to catch a glimpse of the infant grandson (me) he adored but could never again embrace." He died in 1934 of a bronchial infection he was too dispirited to fight. Runyeh died of cancer in 1938.

One mustn't forget how alien such older folk would look in "native" American eyes. Podhoretz's grandfathers were like many of their generation, "with their full beards and sidecurls, dressed in long black coats and hats to match," while his grandmothers wore "unadorned ankle-length dresses and *shaytlach* (the wigs – cheap, rarely washed, and often smelling unpleasant – that married women were required to wear)."[4] None learned to speak much English, and they were largely ignorant of America's role in the larger world – including the

Europe they had all left. Thus, when her youngest son, Maxie, was drafted in World War II, Esther Malkah turned to her grandson Norman and cried: *"Ver iz er, der Uncle Sam? Im hob ikh extra in dr'erd!"* ("Who is he, this Uncle Sam? Him I would especially like to send six feet under.") Beyond her comprehension was that Uncle Sam was calling Maxie to fight against Hitler, Nazism, and the "final solution." She only knew she had to defend her cubs, and to the death. And so, some years after Maxie was drafted, she "got herself killed by not hesitating an instant in chasing her two-year-old granddaughter [Norman's cousin Sharon] . . . into the street and throwing her own body between the child and an approaching automobile."[5]

Maxie was but one of a dozen or more relations who went into the army. Not one was killed or wounded, and this, Podhoretz would later write, only "helped bolster the romantic fantasies I entertained about going to war and giving my all for 'the land of the brave and the free.'" Like the other underage kids in the neighborhood, he recycled "silver foil from cigarette packs" and saved "dimes for stamps that slowly grew into $25 war bonds." For Podhoretz, as for his wife-to-be, Midge Rosenthal, it was "Oh, What a Lovely War," a time of uncomplicated patriotism. With the war's end came "a touch of regret. Now I would never get a chance to find out what it was like to be a soldier fighting for my country and whether I was man enough to take it."[6]

The Yiddish spoken by parents and grandparents was the language of the *shtetlakh*, the towns and villages of Russian and East European territories, including the Podhoretzes' Galicia. Small wonder, therefore, that with his peculiar Yiddish-inflected accent, young Norman was often mistaken for a "greenhorn" just off the boat. The "embarrassment and indignation" he felt was relieved directly after he enrolled at Public School 28. The kindergartener had somehow gotten lost and was climbing a staircase alone, looking for his classmates, when a teacher spotted him and asked where he was going. "I goink op de stez," he replied, and was directly marched to the principal's office and "placed in a remedial-speech class." It was universally agreed in that era of the "melting pot" that, besides inculcating habits of personal hygiene, the school's job was "to burn out our foreign impurities and turn us into real Americans" – that is, to sound "more like an announcer on one of the 'coast-to-coast' radio programs of the thirties than like a kid from a Brooklyn slum."[7]

The Brooklyn slum was one-third Jewish immigrants, one-third Italian immigrants, and one-third blacks, who had only recently come up from the South. The Podhoretzes lived at 2027 Pacific Street. Nearby were many of their aunts, uncles, and cousins. The Podhoretzes' small apartment was a lodestone because, though everyone was poor during the Depression, Julius, unlike a third of the country's working-age men, had a steady job. He was a milkman for Sheffield Farms, sleeping during the day and at night driving a horse and wagon to deliver bottles of milk and pick up the empty ones.

Because Julius earned between $2,000 and $3,000 a year, the immediate family was spared the shame of being "on relief" like many of their neighbors. Even a milkman's salary "could buy a lot of groceries": hence the frequent

lodgers and, on holidays and weekends, hungry visitors converging from the Bronx or from other neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

Quizzing, cajoling, charming, and cooking for them all was Norman's mother, who would later recall how "In those days, I was a queen! A queen!"[8] – a "very pretty" queen, according to Midge Decter, "lively like anything, and extremely clever."[9] She was "a great raconteuse, maybe the best that I've ever known," Norman remembered, "and she would hold the audience spellbound." The men would let her into their card games, where she more than held her own. That would be in the kitchen, and while she was cooking for upward of a dozen people. There was noise everywhere, and "she was at the center of this, managing it."[10]

Julius Podhoretz's grandchildren would remember him as "a true intellectual," forever curious about the world. He read the Yiddish *Der Tog* ("The Day"), which was more elevated than the imperatively titled *Forvertz* ("Forward") with its "pidgin-Yiddish" and leftist politics. A Zionist, he never went in for the socialism or communism that dominated the thinking of most immigrant Jews in New York. When Norman's sister, Millie, enrolled in the American Youth for Democracy, a Stalinist front, her father "constantly berated her for caring more about the fate of the Negroes in America than for her own people, which were, he kept telling her, just then being persecuted to a greater extent in Europe."

Norman's father had some understanding of, as well as pride in, what his son became. His mother, however, would never understand what her adult son actually *did*, and since her husband didn't "deign to explain," she was handicapped in the bragging game mothers played. "So what is he? A joinalist?" her friends would ask. Looking at the semiexotic literati around Norman, she would murmur, "I should have made him for a dentist," since dentists tended to remain in the neighborhoods where they grew up, only with a lot more money. When in the mid-fifties Norman wavered between taking a Ph.D. in English or going directly into the higher "joinalism," his mother urged him to take the Ph.D. It would be "something to fall back on" and, more importantly, people would call him "Doctor."[11]

"Queen" Helen had a true "prince" in Norman, who was quite as good-looking as his "extremely handsome" father[12] and was accordingly coddled and praised by all the women at home as well as by the female teachers at school. But if the boy was made to feel like a conqueror, his father, despite his Depression-era good fortune, became ultimately a defeated man. What happened was that Sheffield Farms abandoned the horse and wagon and began using trucks. Julius, who had never learned to drive, was too vain to take the necessary lessons; failing the driver's tests led to the humiliation of being fired, despite his being a member of the Teamsters Union. (Podhoretz remembers feeling "enormous indignation" at the union for "failing to protect him."[13])

Even when he was working for Sheffield Farms, Julius had slept most of the day, and therefore must have seemed an absent presence in Millie and Norman's lives. Still, his influence – dark and underground – is palpable in Norman's

FIGURE 2. Norman Podhoretz at age two, with his sister, Millie, 1932.

fulfillment of the intellectual aspirations he vaguely harbored. Decter indeed would declare, looking back, that unlike most of his fellow intellectual "young men from the provinces" who moved to metropolitan centers, Norman never "discarded or patronized" his father, particularly his father's Jewishness.[14] Though Julius went to synagogue only on the high holy days, he took his people's culture very seriously. When he had a heart attack at age forty-nine and seemed to be dying in the hospital, he got his son to promise to attend the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). The idea wasn't to qualify as a rabbi but to become knowledgeable about Hebrew, the Bible, Talmudic law and commentary, and Jewish history, philosophy, and literature. A Jew with brains should master the intellectual tradition of his people.

His father's presence is seen also during the commencement ceremonies at Norman's graduation from Boys High. As we will shortly see, he had already won a tuition-only scholarship to Harvard that he couldn't afford to accept, and he had lost hope of winning a Pulitzer Scholarship to Columbia. It looked as though his destination would be his third choice, New York University. Then, as he remembered, "at the graduation itself, the principal said he had an

FIGURE 3. Norman Podhoretz's Bar Mitzvah portrait, 1943.

announcement to make and he read this letter" announcing that Norman had been awarded a Pulitzer Scholarship after all. Very dramatic, "and you know, it was just – my father just was hysterical."[15]

But in reality Norman's father was in a bad way. In 1947 he and Helen owned a commission bakery in Brooklyn, an outlet for the rolls, cakes, and fresh loaves baked at a larger facility nearby. Working fourteen hours a day, they barely scraped by. Julius would fall asleep behind the counter, while Helen – all the customers loved her – ran the shop. She began, for the first time, to lose respect for him. When the business failed, he lapsed into a depression that lasted nearly twenty-five years until his death, at seventy-five, in 1971. With the heart attack, serious prostate trouble, and emphysema, he had little to offer any employer. His last job, in his sixties, was humiliatingly that of a messenger boy.

Whatever their troubles, Norman's parents made a cohesive pair, giving him and his sister a lovingly supportive home in which to grow up. So what if Norman had to share his bed with an uncle or a cousin, or do his homework at the kitchen table while his mother and her cronies gossiped away? Home was

still a haven, and the schools assigning the homework were safe and nurturing. The only dangerous turf lay in the streets, where Jews, Italians, and blacks unpeacefully coexisted.

As Podhoretz would record in his much-reprinted essay "My Negro Problem – and Ours" (1963), the turf wasn't contested according to liberal stereotypes. For one thing, it wasn't rich whites oppressing poor blacks: *everyone* was poor. For another, to a Jewish kid it was the blacks who had the upper hand on the street, where Podhoretz was on several occasions mugged. Hostilities began in third grade, when a black boy, formerly his best friend, hit him after school "and announced that he wouldn't play with me any more because I had killed Jesus." Then there was the playground. The black kids would win a fight and the white kids would "retreat, half whimpering, half with bravado. My first nauseating experience of cowardice," Norman recalled.

Interethnic or inter-racial scuffles are a common feature of Jewish memoirs from the early decades of the twentieth century.[16] A little guy, Podhoretz was nearly always afraid, but he quickly understood that the pain would be much worse if he ran away. As the sportswriter Frank Deford said in a piece about Hall of Fame boxer Billy Conn and his wife, "Big guys grow up figuring nobody will challenge them, so they don't learn how to fight. . . . Little guys are the ones who learn to fight because they figure they had better."[17] In the Brooklyn streets, "I got beaten up a couple of times, and I don't think I ever really won a fight," Podhoretz confessed, "but I was good or staunch enough to hold my own and not be totally humiliated. It was okay to be beaten, as long as you didn't run away." Besides, he added, "It was good training for the life I was to lead."[18]

If giving ground was unthinkable, so was winning – at least on the streets. In the classroom it was different. What counted were intellectual credentials, and Podhoretz's were evident early on. He had an excellent ear. In elementary and middle school he memorized the heavily accented, masculinely rhymed works of Joyce Kilmer and Rudyard Kipling; his own poetic juvenilia, "fortunately" (as he said) lost, imitated them. Later came the subtler verse of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a 1750 classic lamenting the unrealized promise of the poor folk buried beneath simple gravestones – this "flower . . . born to blush unseen." Like many young readers of that elegy, Podhoretz wanted to "blush" – to blossom – in a way that people would notice.

The strength of his ambition was plain in the weeks after his parents bought, on installment, a Smith-Corona typewriter for Millie. She had been persuaded to take the "commercial" curriculum in high school since after all she would be getting married and, before that, would probably work as a secretary.[19] The Smith-Corona was supposed to help her learn to type, and it did. But her kid brother claimed the typewriter for himself, Millie teaching him to use the expensive machine properly and "hat[ing] having to do so," Podhoretz has admitted, "especially as to her it seemed yet another mark of the greater favor in which our parents held me."[20] He soon became adept, first copying pieces from the newspaper and then composing his own poems and stories.

The books he most liked to read, in and out of school, were the ones that boys in the late thirties and early forties often liked: Andrew Lang's fairy books (his "euphonious style . . . was as mesmerizing as the stories"), Norse myths, the baseball novels of John R. Tunis, the adventure novels of Rafael Sabatini, "and countless others by authors whose names I have ungratefully forgotten," he added. Then there was a complete set of the works of Mark Twain, among the very few books (apart from a handful of Yiddish and Hebrew volumes) the family owned, no doubt purchased from a door-to-door salesman. Some of Twain was too difficult, but Podhoretz at once adored *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, despite its often adult vocabulary, and he would later be "proud to say that as a kid I was already a good enough literary critic to like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a much greater work, even more."[21]

Podhoretz was indeed precocious, and the educational establishment twice had him skip a grade, which meant he started junior high at age eleven. By then he had begun, on his own, to read, reread, and in many cases memorize poems in a paperback anthology, possibly given him by Millie or her fiancé, which was filled with uplifting works like Oliver Wendell Holmes's "Old Ironsides" and satirical, down-to-earth ones like Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy." In school, in the ninth grade, Podhoretz was, like millions of American students, required to read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and found it very hard going. Not so, however, the sea-swells of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. He was "intoxicated . . . from the first" and was astonished when his most important teacher at Boys High, Mrs. Haft, informed him that it was time for him to drop Whitman and pick up the then cutting-edge T. S. Eliot, the slightly risqué Robinson Jeffers (*Roan Stallion*) and Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*, which is about lesbianism), and finally the gold standard John Keats, a volume of whose poems she gave him on his fifteenth birthday.[22]

Mrs. Haft, memorialized as Mrs. K. in *Making It* (1968), was that indispensable teacher with whom many successful people have had the good fortune to study in high school. Boys High, where she worked, was once among the most celebrated of New York's public schools.[23] Her influence on Podhoretz is manifest in his devoting quite as many pages to her as to Lionel Trilling or F. R. Leavis, his principal teachers at Columbia and Cambridge, respectively. Those renowned critics recognized in him a tyro who might become like themselves, but they would never have been so impressed if he hadn't first been brought along by Harriet Cashmore Haft.

The Cashmores were an "old Brooklyn" WASP family. After an education at Vassar, Harriet had married an elderly, wealthy, well-assimilated German-Jewish businessman. They lived in Brooklyn Heights, the one section of Brooklyn "fashionable enough to be intimidating," and she occasionally invited her star pupil for visits that may well have been against school rules. Childless, she was in her early forties at the time. While Podhoretz would read her his poems and hear about her own education or "about writers she had met," old

Haft would sit reading a newspaper. He wore "the first *pince-nez* I had ever seen outside the movies," and, in response to Podhoretz's "tearful editorial for the school newspaper on the death of Roosevelt" – the "happy warrior" was the boy's hero – he delivered a "blasphemous" harangue against that betrayer of the American plutocracy.

If Mr. Haft could have seen his wife's pet student out on the streets, he might have reached for his whip. Though the boy never expressed anything like disrespect toward his parents or teachers, he did have a naughty side. As Decter puts it, "he was always doing things that his mother would have died had she known,"[24] such as jumping off the roof of the one-story laundry behind their building or, in that rougher version of River City, hanging out at a pool hall where the tables were a front for "professional gamblers, hustlers, and bookies." The legal age for pool-hall admission was sixteen, but Podhoretz at fourteen would sneak in just to look big.[25]

An alpha student in all subjects but physics, Podhoretz did what was expected, and then he had fun. Even in prepubescence, he and his best friend, "Mutt," formed a Casanova Club, the chief activity being necking with girlfriends. These initiatory gropings sound innocuous enough in *Making It*, where Podhoretz elaborately thanks "a series of quietly smoldering rabbis' daughters . . . who (blessings upon them all) made my adolescent sex life far more abundant than the fiercely pragmatic chastity of the girls in my own neighborhood would otherwise have permitted."[26] In truth, however, he had by age seventeen made one of those neighborhood girls pregnant. When she told her "very religious" Jewish parents of her predicament, they insisted that she have an abortion, which required Podhoretz to take her to a back-street doctor in New Jersey. This was during his freshman year at Columbia, and he confided in his classics professor, Moses Hadas, who gave him the necessary money. It took the frightened couple two trips, for on the first try they were waylaid in the train station by an apparently friendly con man who, for a small fee, gave them a bum steer to a nonexistent doctor at a nonexistent address.[27]

There would be no unwanted baby or shotgun wedding. The academic star of Boys High and the Pulitzer Scholar of Columbia wasn't deliberately going to do anything that would bring ruin upon himself, his family, or a neighborhood girl who "thought I was a poet." But he was extremely fortunate to have been noticed by grown-ups who, if they couldn't exactly mandate responsible sexual practices, could at least sympathize, as Hadas did, and help out.

Back during Podhoretz's junior year in high school, Mrs. Haft's great inspiration was that he should do his senior year at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, one of the most prestigious schools in the country. "They want to send me to boarding school," he told his mother. "What! Leave home? You're crazy!" she said. In later years he thought it was probably a lucky escape from the humiliations a scholarship boy would have had to endure. But it was just

such humiliations that Mrs. Haft anticipated and wanted to minimize, all the more so when, as a senior, he began applying for scholarships to the best colleges.

Hoping to give him a bit of polish, she would take him to the Frick and Metropolitan museums to look at paintings, or to the theater to see *The Late George Apley*. She was determined that he should win a scholarship to Harvard, which is why, on one such excursion into New York, she sprang a change of plan on him, turning away from the Museum of Modern Art and taking him to the "college department" of a then famous preppie clothing shop. He would have to choose which set of externalities, as it were, he wanted to be associated with – the red satin jacket emblazoned with "Cherokee, S.A.C." (social athletic club) that was his habitual tough-guy outerwear or a blue blazer. It was a crisis that brought all his divided loyalties into archetypal collision:

> I had never been inside such a store; it was not a store, it was enemy territory, every inch of it mined with humiliations. "I am," Mrs. K. declared in the coldest human voice I hope I shall ever hear, "going to buy you a suit that you will be able to wear at your Harvard interview." . . . Oh no, I said in a panic (suddenly realizing that I *wanted* her to buy me that suit), I can't, my mother wouldn't like it. "You can tell her it's a birthday present. Or else I will tell her. If I tell her, I'm sure she won't object." The idea of Mrs. K. meeting my mother was more than I could bear: my mother, who spoke with a Yiddish accent and of whom, until that sickening moment, I had never known I was ashamed and so ready to betray.[28]

Somehow they left without buying anything.

From ages thirteen to sixteen, Podhoretz was the "pet" Mrs. Haft endeavored to civilize. "She flirted with me and flattered me, she scolded me and insulted me. Slum child, filthy little slum child, so beautiful a mind and so vulgar in manner."[29] If this were a nineteenth-century French novel, we might have a teacher trying to seduce her student. But his and Mrs. Haft's relation involved nothing sexual.[30] She was simply hoping to acculturate a promising boy. He liked to read, but had latched onto inferior authors. She gave him some hints about better ones. He seemed ambitious to learn about the world across the Brooklyn Bridge – the people of New York, their work, their talk, their habits – but he dressed like a "*konnabum*" (to use his father's Yiddishization of "corner bum"). If he would only listen to her, he might go to Harvard and enter "a life of elegance and refinement and taste."

The top students at Boys High took their gifts and achievements seriously. Podhoretz graduated third in his class (his so-so performance in physics cost him). The valedictorian was a refugee from Nazi Germany named Wolfgang Hallowitz, who later became William W. Hallo, "a big-league" professor of Assyriology and Sumerology at Yale. The salutatorian, whose name Podhoretz could not recall, eventually went to Harvard Medical School and became a psychiatrist. Just below Podhoretz on the slippery but finely calibrated pole was Carl Spielvogel, who graduated from Baruch College in 1952, went on to an extraordinarily successful career in advertising, and became Bill Clinton's