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Life of a Man

New Delhi

My first memories of Leo Szilard go back to a sunny Caribbean verandah at Ocho Rios, in Jamaica, just a decade ago when ~~xxx~~ we were guests of Kitty ~~xxxxxxxx~~ Lehman.

Szilard and the young scientist Harrison Brown and Norman Cousins of the Saturday Review were part of a little huddle of men who had seen the Apocalypse and recoiled from the vision. They were determined that the world should not end in either a bang or a whimper. I recall the earnest electric discussions from which I first learned some of the strange new language of nuclear physics which has perforce become the language of an entire generation, and caught a glimpse of new dimensions of destruction with which we seem doomed to live--for how long?

I saw Szilard many times during the decade that followed. He was not an easy man to know, having learned how to build a shell around his private self even as he opened his intellectual world to you. But from what I learned about the latter he struck me as one of the truly remarkable men our time has produced.

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The closest he came to self-revelation was during an exciting evening at Brandeis University, when he talked to the Seniors in a General Education course which President ~~xxxx~~ Sachar and I had organized. The idea was to get men who had led productive lives to talk about the dilemmas and crises, the decisions and turning-points in their lives, and how they had met them.

Szilard was a natural for the course. He told of his early years in Hungary, as part of the little group of Hungarian intellectuals (Koestler, Teller, Szilard, Drucker, the Polanyi brothers, were only a few of them) who were surely one of the mutations of our era. He told of his Continental education, in the sciences and humanities alike, which we in America are only now beginning to explore. He told of how he studied in the great German universities which so shamefully allowed their traditions of free inquiry to be betrayed. And he told of fleeing from Germany, as one of the group of Jewish thinkers for whom Nazism meant death and who were presented by Hitler to the free world as a gift of life.

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Always practical-minded, Szilard knew that Hitler would never relent from his dream of a thousand-year Nazi imperium, and that only force could answer Hitler's showdown force. He had heard something of the work being done on the Continent toward following up Albert Einstein's equation on atomic energy. He told my students of one of the turning-points of his life, when he sat in a London hotel-room for a week, seeing no one, stopping only to eat a bit of food sent up, snatching a few hours of sleep when he was exhausted, stretching his mind into the new vistas of chemistry, physics, and mathematics until he was satisfied that an atomic reaction was possible and that the rest was a matter of engineering.

The rest is history--how Szilard met with Einstein, how they agreed that America would have to beat the Nazis in moving toward an atomic weapon, how Szilard and Einstein drafted the famous letter to President Roosevelt, which Einstein signed, out of which grew the Manhattan Project--and the fateful bomb. Szilard's role in all this was a double one. His is the name ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~/ associated, along with Fermi's, with the nuclear pile reactor itself. He was also the energizing genius of the little group, able to see not only the technical problems but also their political consequences.

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It is in the latter role that you will find Szilard mainly appearing, both in histories like The Great Decision: the Secret History of the Atomic Bomb by Michael Amrine, and under various names in the strange new genre of novels dealing with the men who made the bomb.

Once it was assured that the bomb could be made and dropped, Szilard took on a new crusade, in which this time he fought a losing fight. It was the crusade of a small group of nuclear scientists to keep mankind from being destroyed by the very weapons they had helped fashion. It was Szilard who helped draft the memorandum to resident Truman and Secretary Stimson before Hiroshima, asking them to end the war by showing the destructive power of the bomb without dropping it on an inhabited city. But without avail.

Afterward Szilard made a moral decision, to turn from nuclear physics to biochemistry, from the sciences of death to the sciences of life. I recall the impact on my students as he told of the

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impulse and reasoning which, rightly or wrongly, led him to this decision. I don't believe that his research in his new field turned up much that was new. It is not given to a man to have more than one decisive idea in a lifetime, and Szilard's perhaps did not even lie in science as such, but rather in the impact of science on man's freedom and man's survival.

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I have put all this in the past narrative tense because I am telling the story of a life. I learned yesterday, from a column by Marquis Childs, that he is in the Memorial Cancer Hospital in New York, with only a few weeks to live. As my tribute to him I have jotted down these few memories from among many that I have of him, ten thousand miles from where he lies dying.

I recall how, when Szilard joined the Brandeis faculty for seven years as a working scientist in residence, he proposed that every University must have a "Happiness Committee" to keep the faculty happy and working creatively. His has always been a playful mind, getting its best intellectual effects from a topsy-turvy irony. I note from Childs that his last idea is a proposal for the nuclear powers to agree on a list of "permitted cities" which would be evacuated when notice was given that they would be bombed. How could one better dramatize the ultimate absurdity of the Great Powers speaking honied words of peace and summitry while they pursue their frenzied weapons race down the ~~xxx~~ Gadarene slope?

And how shall we express another sign of the absurd--a life ebbing away just when it is most needed in the struggle against mass death?

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