A SELF-PORTRAIT

CARL RAKOSI

I was born in Berlin. My father had moved there from Budapest to go into a business manufacturing walking sticks, which every well-dressed man carried in those days. He had no money of his own to put in but he managed to find a silent partner who did and an active partner who knew machines and could run the plant. My father's position was to represent the firm and sell. He was immediately successful, not because of any extraordinary *savoir faire,* he explained, but because of the extraordinary rectitude of business practice. Everyone then, around the turn of the century, took integrity for granted and assumed that your product would be exactly as you represented it, no less, and that it would be delivered on time, and the merchant, in turn, paid you exactly what he said he would. Thus, all you had to do was to make a good product and the rest followed. It helped if it had some new, attractive feature, however, small, but it was not necessary. And since it didn't require salesmanship, it was a dignified occupation in which my father felt thoroughly at home. The rectitude suited his character to a T.

He was young then and on his way to a fortune, whereupon the partners, seeing how well the business was doing, bought him out. Thus, his own success led to his undoing. It was the one time in his life, he said, when he was almost a millionaire. He remembered these years affectionately and never tired describing them years later in Kenosha where he had a jewelry store. He would talk as he sat at his workbench fixing watches, a looped magnifying glass in one eye and the other eye squinting in sympathetic concentration, and I at his feet rapt in the glow of his recollections.

I can see it all: my father with his trim moustache and grey eyes and straight gentlemanly nose and fair complexion... looks, clothes, manner clean-cut... the voice big and resonant, unexpected in such a small man, and an air of utter integrity. An ideal Swede, as I imagined an ideal Swede might look. This man, Leopold Rakosi, setting out for the day, walks into a store with his sample case, introduces himself... educated Hungarians spoke an elegant German as a second language in those days... and hands the owner his card. The owner responds courteously, a sign that Leopold Rakosi is persona grata and can proceed, and Leopold Rakosi begins to show his samples, unhurried, dignified. Enough simply to show the merchandise. That is understood. The merchant could see for himself that the sticks were of the highest quality. The firm's reputation for rectitude stood behind every item. No need to say more.

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Berlin with its wide, splendid boulevards shaded by trees, people out for a stroll in the evening (no motor cars yet), decked out in their best clothes, the men twirling their canes as they walked, the elegant carriages. Hadn't I heard of Unter den Linden? The Tiergarten? It was obvious that he admired that well-ordered, reliable society.

I have to remember that he was only thirty at this time and soaking up new experiences. He had one in particular which was in the nature of a revelation and forever changed his thinking. It happened somewhere near the Tiergarten, I think. A crowd had gathered around two speakers. He walked over to listen. One was a young man about his age. He was almost shouting, in order to be heard, about the terrible privations of the poor, working men included, the disabled, the homeless, the unemployed, the other Berlin portrayed years later by Käthe Kollwitz, urging his listeners to band together... in union there was strength... and join him. Force the government to improve their condition!

My father was all ears and became more and more excited, dazzled by the power of the words, moved in every cell by the speaker's deep moral passion, which he felt at white heat, and his commitment to a cause from which he himself could not benefit, and the realization came to my father then that this was the noblest thing a man could do... he could not conceive of anything nobler... to have a great cause, to be a spokesman, an advocate, a champion of the oppressed and downtrodden. He never got over that. There was awe in his voice, almost reverence, and a hush, and his face became transformed when he mentioned the names of the speakers, and I, sitting at my favorite spot next to his right elbow by the workbench, basked in the glow of his idealism. And when he went on about the brotherhood of man and the necessity for justice, his favorite themes, a wave of emotion surged through me and lifted me up, and I was glad. Not wanting to disturb the alchemy of the moment, I did not tell him that I knew very well who the speakers were, they were well-known in history, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

All his life my father was an idealist and a socialist at heart, and I'm afraid much of this has rubbed off on me.

He was born in Szilágymegye, a village in Transylvania, the most ancient part of Hungary, the son of Barbara Mayer and Abraham Rozenberg, neither of whom I ever saw. "Father Abraham", the peasants called him, out of affection as much as teasing... he was their Jew... and because of something different about his appearance, something biblical, his tall, patriarchal bearing and long beard and that he prayed in Hebrew, the sacred tongue. He dealt in grain and when I heard from my father that the peasants, who distrusted Jews, also had great respect for him, I knew that he must have been extraordinarily honorable in his dealings with them.

"Father Abraham" had two sons and two daughters, all of whom moved to Budapest at am early age, as there was no future for them in a village. The eldest, Jacob, went first. He had attended a Jesuit gymnasium, probably because there was no other secondary school in the village, and had done so well that his teachers urged him to continue his education at the University of Budapest. But there was no money for this. Besides, it was very questionable whether, as a Jew, he could get into the University.

So the Jesuits agreed to underwrite the costs and Jacob converted, apparently as part of the arrangement. My father was deeply disturbed by this because nothing offended his moral sense more than a Jew giving up his religion and identity to become a Christian, especially for practical reasons. He avoided talking about it because he was very fond of his brother and looked up to him.

Jacob graduated with honors from the University and went on to teach philosophy there for many years. What must have been for reasons of expediency he changed his name to *Rákosi,* a variant of *Rákóczi,* Hungary's great national hero. With that, he ended once and for all his connection to the world of Szilágymegye and "Father Abraham". In Budapest, however, it was not at all unusual for Jews to take on Magyar names, not necessarily because of expediency but because they had become Magyars in spirit and wanted Hungarian names to show it. It was he who, later, started the first movie studio in Hungary. The photograph he sent us of his wife, the country's most beautiful screen star, sent me into idolatry.

Towards my father he acted as a guardian. Knowing that my father would have to have some kind of a trade to make a living, Jacob arranged a watch-maker apprenticeship for him with a master craftsman in Budapest, a reputable Christian approaching retirement age. My father was only thirteen then. By agreement he was to work and learn under this master for the whole time, a period of seven years. In return he lived in the master's home, got room and board and pocket money, and agreed to behave decently, according to the life-style in the house. Living there, he came to feel like a member of the family, and the master felt the same towards him and looked out for his welfare.

My father found the regimen exacting and severe and too limited, but he wasn't complaining when he told me about it. When he was through, he had learned not only how to diagnose what was wrong with the most complicated timepieces and repair them but also how to make new parts from scratch, if necessary, on his lathe to replace the damaged ones. There was no such thing for him, therefore, as not being able to fix a watch, any watch. He was in control. By this time, you will guess, he had become a perfectionist, and that too, I'm afraid, has rubbed off on me. The severity became only a tiny memory towards the end, for when he too had become a master craftsman, he had also become a young man about town, enjoying the pleasures of Budapest, which sparkled in his telling like champagne. By this time he too had changed his name to Rákosi.

Now came a stretch as a hussar. *Stretch* is the wrong word but I can't find the right one, one which would express pure romance, for in a small, homogeneous country with a long history like Hungary, being a hussar was, in my father's memory, pure romance: the brilliant crimson braided coats slung gallantly over one shoulder, the swords, the proud, dashing horses, everybody knowing – wasn't it all the books and daily papers? – that the hussars were the finest fighting cavarly in all Europe, nonpareil.

My father, always attracted to spirit, did his best to live up to this standard. He became a carck shot with a pistol, able to split a playing card down the middle along its edge at a hundred paces, and never took an anti-Semitic slur or look from any man

without beating him down, and he had many stories to prove it. And I too have many stories to prove how I beat down slurs and deprecatory looks on the playground cast at me because I was small and looked slightly different, and bullies thought I would be an easy target. Bam! would go my fist at the first sign. It never occurred to me that I might lose. How could I? I was in the right. As I write this now, I realize the behind me was always the spirit of my father.

All this talk about him has made me run ahead of myself. Actually I have just been born. The address in *ein und sechzig Kommenandent Strasse,* which pronounced in German sounds like a no-nonsense Prussian order not to be countermanded. The day in November 6, 1903; parents, Flora Steiner and Leopold Rakosi. I am in a very long room, so long that I can not see its end. There is very little furniture. The ceiling is very high and vast. There are shadows. The further away they are, the longer and heavier. There is no one there. I lie in my crib. All I'm aware of is that I *am.* And the silence. The silence is loud. No one comes. The silence is all there is. The nothing is oppressive. Hours go by and it becomes harder and harder to bear. There is no end. There is only the silence. And nothing. But beyond what I can see is something ominous looming.

This is not a dream; it's a memory, and I am bonded to it. It's a memory of no one being there and no one coming. A mother was not there. I'm sure.

I am bonded to the silence. Blessed silence in which poetry comes. Silence as my behavior, in which I say little and listen, always listen, in order to find out. That I do not mind. It has become my character. In it I find a strange, supernal ecstasy, related, it seems to me, to the magical inner quiet in a perfect poem, in the process of embodiment losing its supernal quality. Or to the absolute silence in the landscape behind the figures in some fifteenth-century Italian paintings, as if everything for some mysterious reason had stopped. Closer at hand the silence in Magritte's *A la Rencontre du Plaisir.* Here there is both absolute silence and absolute emptiness, compelling the spectator, in the spirit of the painting, to ask:

Mother, why is the sky overcast?
Why is the building empty?
Why is the ball there?
Why is the ball so large?
Who are the two men?
Why can't we see who they are?
Where are they destined?
Why aren't they talking to each other?

I would be surprised if Magritte could tell you why he painted this picture this way. The reason is buried in his early experiences, as my own style, whatever it is, is buried in mine. The larger point I deduce from this is that any style, any aesthetic taste, originates in life experiences which long antedate any experience one has with the arts and which have nothing to do with them.

The same applies to those hushed moments in a Beethoven symphony when he ar-

rives at something mysterious at the center of things, the great forces all around held in suspension. This overwhelming quiet is explained and dismissed as inspiration. It would be more accurate to perceive it as a greatly enlarged artistic re-creation of an early experience, large and great in proportion to the imagination and inspiration.

I am also bonded, however, to the aloneness of that distant room, aloneness on a sclae beyond physical bounds, the unbearable shadows in the distance, the bodiless, terrifying Something looming out there. That's always with me. It was there in the short story I started to write years ago. I started with where I was in the story, in an empty house, and as I went on to describe what was in the house, I felt myself being pulled further and further into its extremities until I was sure that just beyond the last, looming shadow I was going to encounter it. At that point I had to stop. I was too scared.

It's there in my meditation on *Christopher Smart:*

Yet I have been
in the same presence
alone at night
in the forest,
spellbound in the un/
conscious
where there is no
perception
of purpose
universe.

It was there in a secluded farmhouse in Pennsylvania which a friend had loaned me to work in over the weekend. The drive from New York was sunny and uneventful. When I reached it, however, I noted that the nearest farmhouse was beyond sight. I was alone, and when the night came on, darker and darker, the daemonic spirit of the whole house, which my mind tells me could not be there, came down on me, and I fled in terror.

It is there to this day in my own apartment in San Francisco when I'm alone there at night and become aware of the unending silence facing me, and the aloneness creeps closer and closer to the moment when it will leap into a far greater aloneness, that utter aloneness in the universe, derived, I feel, from my aloneness and helplessness as a baby in that enormous room long ago. It does not help me to know this, however. The supernatural continues to have me in this thrall. It is not fear of anything physical, for I do not have this fear when anyone is with me, even a dog. This thrall affects what I like in poetry. Although I am a rationalist through and through, I am held in a similar thrall by the approach to the mystical in poetry, which seems to be in poetry's nature to express (to be *in* the mystical is to be in the occult and that is quite a different world). Another case example of what we mean when we say, literary taste is a personal matter, as against its being the product of one's literary influences.

In any case, I think now that it was my mother's inability to function as a mother which led to my parent's divorce, a thing unheard of in those days. I suspect she suf-

fered from what was called melancholia then, and now deep depression, and that it was simply more than she could bear to mother my brother, Lester, and me, and finally even to be with us. It could not be ruled out even that my father and her parents thought that in her condition it was dangerous for the children to be with her and kept her out. How else can I explain never seeing her, even in Baja, Hungary, where we lived next with her parents, Rosalia and Samuel Steiner, until I was six, and never remember her ever touching me all that time?

I have considered other possibilities and have had to rule them out. The Steiners were a fine, upright couple, greatly admired by my father. The likelihood, therefore, of her being unfaithful in a small provincial town like Baja, where the Jews lived in their own neighborhood, was practically nil. Besides, she was extraordinarily beautiful, both my father and stepmother agreed, with rich black hair falling to her waist and very full, expressive dark eyes; the kind of beauty that my daughter Barbara too has, who at the age of nineteen won two beauty titles, Miss Minneapolis and Miss ROTC. Knowing my father, I'm sure only something as impossible to cope with as her melancholia and incapacity to function as a mother would have made him break with her.

Furthermore when her name came up in conversation, which was not often, there was never the slightest suggestion that they had been incompatible. On the contrary, he would stop a moment as if this was a special case and he had to find the right words for it, and his voice, and my stepmother's too, would become gentler than I heard at other times, and they would both look sad and sympathetic, as if what they would have said if they had not held back was, "Poor woman, because of a condition she couldn't help, she lost her two boys forever".

My father did not volunteer information on the subject, perhaps out of delicacy, not wishing to say anything against her, because he had nothing against her, and I never asked. It never occurred to me. She wasn't *in* my life, after all, and I felt no need to know. Beside, I would have been reluctant to make waves by asking something that might have been embarrassing all around and have led to other questions even more embarrassing, and who knows how destabilizing. In my later years when I was far enough away from these early events to be free of possibly suppressed feelings about them, I perceived what was basic and unchangeable in the situation, that we were of common stock and that I did have questions to ask about her whose answers might have restored some lost knowledge about myself. By that time, however, it was too late. There was no one left alive to ask.

The next thing I'm aware of after Berlin is that I'm in Baja, Hungary (if I were literary I would add, "a dusty, sleepy town on the Danube", but I don't know for a fact that it was that). It is 279 Fő utca. There is a fence in front of our house and a cobbled street. The street is usually quiet. Occasionally a troop of hussars rides by, their coming announced from a distance by the sharp clatter of the hooves on the cobblestones, and the kids rush outside to watch, all eyes, mouths agape. And once in a great while the street explodes. It's a rock fight between older, invading Christian boys and defending Jewish boys on the block. I watch but it's much too fierce for me. I'm only

a little kid then and it's as if the mighty forces of nature had broken loose and were rushing at me, and I run into the house. But my brother, who is five years older, is out there among the defenders and holds his ground, small as he is.

Back of the house is a large yard, and that's where the main action and the wonders are. I know them only in the summers when the heat induces a throbbing in the air, tiny heatwaves almost tactile. And a single high, perpetual note, a tone rather, too airy and pure to emit from an instrument, seems about to emerge... a sister note to singing, a fundamental tone under it... a zinging? ...yet imaginary like the fundamental bass in music.

It is summer, man's element, and nothing can keep me indoors. There's a large barn in the back that has a touch of mystery about it but I never go inside to investigate. The mulberry tree is more important. There all along its branches are planted caterpillars chewing the tree's leaves. At first nothing seems to be happening but if I watch patiently, I can see a thread of silk extruding by millimeters as slow as summer from its rear. I can't believe silk is coming out right in front of my eyes!

And chicken and geese wander around the yard. One goose is tied up and from time to time our maid goes over, forces its jaws open and shoves in a handful of corn kernels. Then she holds the jaws shut and with her other hand squeezes its throat and pulls downwards until the corn is too far down to be regurgitated. A peasant girl.

Then a moment I can't forget. She has climbed up on the swing and with her legs apart and skirts up, she swings back and forth relentlessly, and Lester stands facing her, looking up her legs, transfixed. Something electric is going on but I don't know what.

Throughout all this, I have a sense that my mother is somewhere around, somewhere in the back. It is persistent as the summer and hangs in the atmosphere, a vague rumor, slightly mesmeric. But I never see her.

Once a year at different times Grandfather Steiner's two sons visited us from Munich. They were now middle-aged but as young men they had caused my grandparents great heartache and worry with their carousing and sponging and squandering and shady deals, never willing to work. In desperation my grandfather, who had been successful in business, loaned them his reserve funds in order to put them into a business and set them on their feet once and for all. But they squandered that like everything else and were dishonest. This ruined him. He had no capital left with which to recuperate and in his last years had to start all over in a small store, repairing umbrellas.

This is when I knew him. What I did not know, of course, as a young child, was why he was always so somber and preoccupied. When Grandmother took me downtown through the darting, confusing traffic to visit him in the store, I was cautioned not to bother him but to just watch. There he sat at his workbench, like my father at his, bent over, repairing an umbrella.

As I was saying, when the Munich sons visited, they came with a large retinue of wives and children and presents for everyone... for Lester and me a large, extravagant box from that exciting foreign world of chocolates with various liqueurs inside. You

can imagine the excitement and commotion: my grandparents standing at the door, smiling and looking pleased, the welcoming, the embraces, but they were just going through the motions. There was an unspoken distance between us in which we could not move towards each other, for the sons after moving to Munich had converted to Christianity and married German wives, and the children were Christian and had always been that.

"Carl (Károly in Hungarian), meet your cousins", someone said.

We looked at each other. We were expected to feel something.

Grandfather had a third son, Károly, after whom I was named. He was the good son, a sweet, likeable man. He was youngest of the three and remained in Baja. Grandfather, however, was unlucky in him too. Károly lost his life in a building collapse before I was born.

There's not much more to recount. In Hungary the state regarded the Jews as a separate community and provided funds to them for education. Thus, there were Jewish public schools administered by the local Jewish community body. It was in one of these that Grandmother enrolled me when I was five. All I remember of it was the confusion of that first day, the older boys on the playground doing breakneck acrobatics on the trapezes, yelling and shouting back and forth, and finally tearing off in my direction to get back to class on time, so close that for a moment I had the sensation that they were going to run me down and trample me.

I remember too what I should not remember, it is so trivial. It is summer again. A Serbian workingman has just sat down on a bench to have his noon lunch and I smell something overpowering. He takes out a pocket-knife and holding a slab of smoked bacon in one hand, he slices it with the other the way one would slice a peach, and the way he slices his country bread too, and eats with gusto, a thousand years of peasant life... the peasant and his pig... behind him. Apparently the body has a memory not plugged in to the screening intellect because that aroma, which could not possibly be important, is still in my nostrils.

And finally there is my departure. I can not improve on what I have already written about that. I have never able to remember, even in analysis, what I felt as a boy of six when I parted from my grandmother. She had been my mother, but more gentle and kind than a mother. Her presence has always been with me. The eyes are sad and reflective, the face tired, beginning to show wrinkles, but the mouth smiles and an incomparable sweetness that is her character exudes from her, holding back nothing, and envelops me. She leans towards me, attentive, smiling, and I respond in like, as I had learned to do from her, also smiling, and inside me all is light.

Now my father had remarried and this woman had come to take my brother and me back with her to America, where I had never been. I do not know now whether I suspected that I would never see my grandmother again but I did know it was an important parting, yet all I remember of that last day is the hustle and bustle and a great silence and my extraordinary calm and robustness and spirit.

I found the explanation for this many years later in a passage of a book. The author was describing how the political prisoners in a Siberian detention camp during the Sta-

lin terror managed to preserve their sanity. "The main thing", she wrote, "was in a certain self-control: it was important not to think about the future. Expect nothing and be ready for anything. The only other thing was to scream, but no one would have heard".

With that formula I managed my transition tc America quite well. But my poor grandmother, what was there for her to hold on to?

I can imagine the final moment. The bags are packed. We are all dressed, ready to leave. The time has come. All I am thinking of is the going and the necessity to act as if this were like any other day. She has suppressed her tears so as to make the parting bearable to me. I walk up to her and like my granddaughter Julie, also six at the time I wrote this, let myself be hugged and kissed with that self-possession and vigilance which protect children. And I leave without recognizing her grief or even acknowledging that this is a separation.

Forgive me.

I had a chance in 1980 to visit Baja when I was in Budapest to give a lecture to the PEN club on American poetry of the 1930's but chickened out. What happened was that when I told my host that I would like to see Baja again, where I had lived as a child, but would need an interpreter to go with me because I had lost most of my Hungarian, he looked blank, as if he couldn't comprehend why anyone would want to go there. Typical for a Budapestian, I learned later, but I didn't know it then. His look fazed me. What was wrong with Baja? What had happened? In any case, an interpreter who would be interested and have the time couldn't be found at the moment, so I let the matter drop. I told myself that I had done the right thing, that the Communists had probably changed all the street names and I wouldn't have been able to find my old house anyhow; that in seventy years the town would have changed so much that I wouldn't have been able to recognize it; and that the houses, like the great old public buildings in Budapest, would probably look terribly neglected and shabby. I was afraid what little I remembered of Baja would be demolished. But I don't know.

In that connection I have a story to tell. Before going to Budapest I gave a reading at Cambridge and visited with my friend Jeremy Prynne, most rigorous and intellectual of British poets. When he heard I was going to Budapest he gave me the name of a young man he knew there that he thought I would find interesting, Dr. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák. When I got into the city I called Dr. Szegedy-Maszák and told him about my lecture at PEN, and he said he would meet me there; he would be carrying a copy of *Amulet* under his arm so that I would be able to recognize him.

After the lecture, when he learned I was from Baja, he told me this. Years ago he had spent a year at Cambridge studying American poetry with Prynne. Prynne, who had been introduced to my work by Andrew Crozier, a former student of his, and had come to have a high regard for it, introduced his Hungarian student to *Amulet,* an early book of mine. Dr. Szegedy-Maszák subsequently returned to teach poetry at the University of Budapest and one year had a student who was similarly interested in American poetry, and he introduced him to my work. After graduation the student went to Baja to teach... my work, hopefully, among others. And thus I lie, cushioned, on the

bed of fantasy that I have become reconnected to my past in actuality because things of my making, of my self, therefore, objective *Doppelgängers,* have returned to Baja.

I was now in the hands of the woman from America whose mission was to take me safely to my father, whom I didn't remember ever seeing, and she looked as if she had every intention and the competence to do so. All I had to do was listen to what she told me to do. At six, with nothing between me and what was now going to happen, there was nothing else I could do, and I did it.

Our first stop was Budapest, where Lester and I were outfitted with new clothes. Then Vienna where, for a treat, we sat in an outdoor cafe and had pastry and coffee under an equal layer of whipped cream, which I was urged to drink because it was so special to the city. Our next stop was our point of embarkation. Was it Bremen? Hamburg? Rotterdam? I don't remember. It was a city so congested and bustling that I was glad to board ship.

We went second-class. I remember Lester leading me down a forbidden flight of stairs to see what it was like in third class. It was more crowded there and the talk was thicker and louder and more of it, but otherwise not different that I could see. We tried also to see what it was like in first-class, what the rich people looked like and what they were doing, but the steps were barred to that deck.

The only other thing I remember is throwing up night after night at the dinner table on the clean white tablecloth, and my father's wife... I didn't think of her yet as a stepmother... rushing me outside. It must have been a trial for her but she didn't reproach me. She just handled it efficiently. It was her responsibility, she had taken it on, and she went about it with what I was to learn later was her characteristic common sense.

Then an enormous excitement seized the ship. Everyone was out on deck, babbling away, and looking out into the distance. I had trouble seeing anything but I finally did. It was the Statue of Liberty. After much tooting from small vessels all around and men scurrying and shouting, the ship docked and the next thing I knew we were on Ellis Island.

There, into what looked like an enormous, barren barracks, the immigrants poured and stood around, waiting nervously in their best clothes to check out their papers and to go through the required medical examination, and it hit them head-on for the first time that no one knew exactly what state of health they had to be in order to pass. The room became all waiting and tension, and in the suspense they all burst out talking at the same time, relating dread stories about people they knew who had failed to pass and had been sent back.

Our guardian was worried too. She was worried about Lester. He was small and skinny and a hunchback. A medical examiner might well think be was a poor risk. Her face looked tight and anxious. We waited. We heard it could take weeks. Finally our names were called. Our guardian explained to the examiner that Lester and I spoke no English, and he asked her a few questions, examined Lester carefully, then me, less carefully, and waved us on. At the immigration desk the officer looked down on me and smiled kindly, and we passed through.

Was my father outside to meet us? I don't remember. Our destination was Chicago, where he had a position as master craftsman with Moore and Evans, a large wholesale jewelry firm, where he was assigned to work on returned, complicated timepieces difficult to repair.

How did I learn English? I haven't the faintest idea. It occurred as if one day I didn't know a word of it and the next day I was speaking it like everybody else. Only one small incident marred the process. A kid on the playground made fun of my accent. In a flash I was on him and chased him into the schoolhouse. I don't think he expected that.

The plan was not to remain in Chicago but to open up a jewelry store in some town nearby, where competition was less fierce. Moore and Evans was willing to supply the stock on credit, and my father had saved up enough for store rent for the first few months. During that time, he figured, he would be able to bring in enough from repairing watches to support the family. With that in mind, he opened up a store in Gary, Indiana, which was booming then.

Gary's school system was better than you'd expect in such a rough steel town. That was because it happened to have a bold, innovative superintendent at the time who assigned children to grade levels not on the basis of age but mental ability. Thus, one day I was sent to a room I had never seen before and given a test; I had not the foggiest notion why. The next day I was called out of class to the principal's office and told I was going to be moved ahead a grade. I couldn't understand it. Then a month later, the same thing, another grade ahead. I had no difficulty doing the work in the upper grades, but now everybody in the class was two years older than I, and that did make a difference in my life because henceforth everybody in class would always be two years older and bigger and I would always be two years younger and smaller, even at the university.

I think my father would have done all right in Gary... in fact, if he had stayed long enough and bought a few lots, which were selling for under a hundred dollars then, he would have made a fortune... but he thought he could do better in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and we moved there. That was his last move.

I grew up in Kenosha and have been affected by its particular Middle-West character... industrial, some sixty miles from Chicago, on the southwest shore of Lake Michigan, which we could see from our front window, population 50,000, heavily German and Polish, and the way of speaking that goes with that.

Our house was a house of daily scrimping and worry because of the nature of my father's business. As I said, he had started in Gary with only a credit line from Moore and Evans. He earned enough from his watch repairing to provide us with food and part of the other necessities; he could depend on that, but he never knew whether he would sell enough jewelry to provide for the rest and pay his bill at Moore and Evans on time. As long as I knew him, when that time approached, my father and stepmother would stop everything else and absent themselves for days, trying to figure out how they could pay that bill, where the money was going to come from. It was all worry. They usually made it, but just barely.

Sometimes they would have to ask for an extension, and those were the most anxious moments because their credit was at stake. If they lost that, they were finished. In good times, what was left over after paying Moore and Evans was put into enlarging the stock to attract more customers, and in the best times, into putting up a new building with a more attractive store and with living quarters for us upstairs, a saving in the long run. All very nice, but now on top of the constant debt to Moore and Evans there was a monthly mortgage payment to make. Thus, no matter what happened, there was never anything left over for the family. And it was in the nature of the situation that there couldn't be. A jewelry store in a working-class neighborhood could never bring in enough from sales to be able to accumulate the capital for moving to an expensive downtown location where there would be a chance for greater profits.

There was the additional worry that years of concentrated use of his eyes on minuscule watch parts was bringing on symptoms of glaucoma in my father and we didn't know when he would lose his sight and have to stop work entirely.

This is what had my parents locked in and dominated their lives, subsuming their softer, convivial qualities. It locked me in, too. It locked me into a lifelong concern about making a living and affected my personal habits and the way I deal with practical matters. For example, not so long ago, Ed Dorn was telling me that he was thinking of moving to San Francisco with his family, and I asked him the thing that would be foremost in my mind, what job was he going to?

"Oh, no job", he replied.
"How can you move", I asked, "if you don't have something?"
"Oh", he said, "I can always find something."

Outside the store, the streets and empty lots and beaches were teeming with boys, and perhaps in somewhat the same way that I had learned English, one day I was just a little kid playing by myself around the house and the next day I was one of them, playing baseball and basketball and soccer and ice hockey, and swimming and roller-skating and ice-skating, flying along in long musical lines, and riding a bike without hands, all my natural medium – my song of summer, turned crystal in winter. I was utterly content and absorbed.

After school, I found odd jobs. I washed dishes in an icecream parlor, I did menial chores in a barbershop, things like that. Summers, I worked with the men, assembling chairs and bedsprings at the Simmons Bed factory and reading house meters for the electric power company. I was in fact an all-American boy.

Although my father and stepmother were intelligent and had a high regard for learning, she was too practical and literal to be interested in more than a newspaper, and his eyes at the end of a day were too tired to be able to read. Thus, there were no books in our home. That didn't bother me because I didn't know I was missing anything, until one day I discovered the public library on the other side of town.

The library, courtesy of Andrew Carnegie, was a charming building in the style of a graceful Grecian temple. It was set in an equally charming and well-kept park. You

approached this distant sanctuary from a long and winding path that looked lonely and a bit melancholy because no human figure was to be seen on it. When I started out across it, I too felt a bit lonely and melancholy, and the venture felt as if it would take a bit of daring. As you entered the portico, a high, massive bronze door carved in the Renaissance manner confronted me, and the pillars, which from a distance looked so graceful, now loomed over me, as massive in their Grecian way as the door, and cowed me with their majesty and austere, imperial spirit.

Now to pull open that heavy door and enter. All inside was cool and quiet, illuminated by a golden glow from vaulted lights. Before me was an open space that looked like an atrium. It was so cool and quiet that I would not have been surprised to hear water murmuring as in a glade. At the far end two ladies were sitting at a desk and when they saw a small boy approaching, they looked a bit surprised and smiled encouragingly. There was only one other person in the library, a lone man in the periodical room, absorbed in reading.

"Could I look at the books in the stacks?" I asked in a subdued voice to go with the subdued air, expecting to be told, with the well-bred manners of such a place, that I was not old enough.

"Oh yes!"

They looked pleased and continued smiling. I gathered from that that it was safe to be bolder.

"Could I take some home with me to read?" I asked, again expecting to be rebuffed.

"Yes. Yes."

They looked even more pleased and as one of them led me to the adult books, they were positively beaming. But I couldn't quite believe it. There was a mistake somewhere. When it came right down to it, they weren't *really* going to let a little kid like me take adult books out of the library. Furthermore, how could precious books like that be free? So when I brought back five books from the stacks to check out that first day, I stood mute and avoided looking at anyone, hoping in this way to appear as if I was unaware of the error and that it would go unnoticed. But the lady checked the books out without any hesitation, smiling all the while, and I hurried out with them before she could change her mind.

Now, however, I had the problem of how to get them home unobserved, for if I ran into Jewish boys of my acquaintance, who altogether unlike Jewish boys of their age in New York, read only schoolbooks when they read, they'd razz me and I'd never hear the end of it, and I had no way of protecting myself because the razzing hid under the guise of masculine humor. So I'd slink through downtown very fast on my way home, hoping they wouldn't be in their father's store to see me.

There was another reason I didn't want to be seen: in all the time I was in Kenosha I don't remember ever seeing a grown man carrying books on the street, and I knew they weren't reading. So I couldn't help feeling embarrassed, suspecting that they might think me peculiar, and I avoided looking at them when I was carrying my embarrassing cargo so as not to draw attention to myself.

Once I was across the bridge on the immigrant North Side I was safe. During the day there was no one in the long block of saloons on the way to our house, and if a lone figure did happen to be in one and looking out at the street at that exact moment, books were so far outside anything he was interested in that I passed by, invisible. The few who knew me as Rakosi's boy already knew I was different, and beyond that they weren't interested. As for my folks, they didn't object to my secreting myself in my room with my books as long as I did my chores.

The library now became my secret home and my secret vice. When my parents asked my where I had been, I referred vaguely to it or to some other place, always in a casual way as if it were of no importance, not wanting them to suspect that my life had changed or that I was different from before. With my friends the matter never came up, so my secret life was never found out.

The stacks where I made my home were illuminated like the atrium by a soft glow and were quiet, too, and deserted. There was a small table and chair under a window for sitting and reading as long as you pleased, without intrusion or question, and all around a great collection of the classics in literature and philosophy in almost mint condition, most wonderful of all a complete set of the old Scribner's edition of Dickens with the original illustrations; ditto Thackeray; and the great Russians... Maxim Gorki's unforgettable *My Life* comes to mind; and Huneker who introduced me to the wonders of music and the cross-cultural currents in the arts. To make a long story short, I read everything, everything. And I found there the mental universe which suited me, and I discovered its scope and depth and excitement, but I had no one to share this with or the wild nature of my excitement.

I had no inkling of anything in me beyond this until I was sixteen and wrote a piece in high school in senior English on George Meredith. To my wonderment the teacher wrote back a long enthusiastic response as to an intellectual equal, with comment after comment indicating that she respected my literary mind. That is how I learned that I had one and that I could express it.

I was now beginning to be fixed in my future course. I had been a B+ student until then, except in English, which had been A, so it made no sense to my parents to end my education there. They thought they could manage to support me at a university if they were very careful and if I lived frugally and worked during the summers. They would send me as much as they could.

It was decided that I would go to the University of Chicago because there was a Jewish family not far from the University with whom I could room and board cheaply, an elderly couple that our boarder, Samuel Kleinman, had lived with for many years when he worked in Chicago and spoke of very highly and affectionately. I had already been attracted by the University's somewhat Byzantine aura, so I was jubilant, and my parents, who had been concerned about leaving a sixteen-year-old on his own in such a big, impersonal city, felt reassured that I would be under the eyes of a responsible couple.

My first sight of the University was exciting. There before me was old England, a quadrangle of Gothic buildings more severe and cloister-like than Oxford or Cam-

bridge, possibly because the interiors seemed to be always in shadow, and passing unhurriedly in and out, older students, at one with the atmosphere, in very serious dialogue so monkly quiet as to sound like murmuring.

By the term's end, however, my spirit felt as if it was being dragged against its will into a cloister and began to retreat. More and more it was a relief getting back to the city. The students broke up after classes and dispersed like buckshot so quickly that there was no opportunity to make friends. As a consequence I felt lonely and crimped, and was too young to get much out of Chicago on my own. By the end of the second term my spirit was in full revolt and I decided to transfer to the University of Wisconsin.

Before I did, however, I wrote poetry for the first time in an English class, along with George Schuyler, my only friend then, a black student who wrote Kiplingesque verse and later became well-known columnist in the black press. Again, like the invisible way I had learned English, one day I was a reader of literature and the next day, there was the knowledge, as if it had always been there, that I wanted to be a writer and that I cloud best express myself in poetry, not prose. It happened in this class.

In Madison, in order to save money, I moved in with some older Jewish acquaintances from Kenosha who were preparing for the law and medicine and who already had rooms. We had our meals on the other side of town with a youngish Jewish widow with a slew of small children. She was a cheerful, stocky little woman with ruddy cheeks. As soon as we sat down to her table and saw spread out before us all the dishes heaped high, steaming hot from the kitchen, and rich spicy smells all around, like a home, we unwound and started jabbering away, joking and bantering and laughing, and she stood by our chairs with a big smile, as if entranced, and took in every word, laughing hard along with us and making herself a part of us without intruding. How she enjoyed seeing us eat heartily! And when the food ran out, how happily she ran into the kitchen for more. The place had the jovial spirit of Dickens when she was there, and the warm, giving spirit of a genial mother who knew how to keep hands off. How much she gave us! And how uncertain her own future was.

Despite this connection, I had no question in my mind by this time that I was a poet, that that was the authentic *I* and that my life would be determined by that. Thus, when I was being a poet, I felt as unconnected to being a Jew as if I were on another planet which admitted no extraneous body. This had me in such a powerful fix that it shut out the reality of my father's support and I acted as if it would go on forever, taking only courses that fitted this planetary purpose, with no view to a vocation.

It was in this state that I met my new friends. By the time I got to Madison, Leon Serabian Herald was already established there on a Zona Gale fellowship for talented young writers. We formed an immediate bond. It was he who told me about Margery Latimer, saying that I'd like her. She was the other Zona Gale fellow on campus. Leon was an Armenian whose parents had been killed in the Turkish massacres. He had been brought up by an uncle in Cairo and had come to the states on his own at the age of what he thought was twenty. He couldn't be sure because the Turks had destroyed the

vital statistics in his village. When I met him, he had learned to speak a faultless English.

He was a gentle friend with a sunny, open disposition. He had an endearing simplicity. All he wanted was to be a poet. The only other thing he needed was a woman, and to her he wrote paeans of lovely, exotic metaphors. Neither Margery nor Leon at that time had intellectual interests outside literature, so they didn't bother to go much to classes except to William Ellery Leonard's writing course. Leonard was Madison's Man of Letters, as well known then as a poet as Carl Sandburg.

Margery came from Portage, a small town near Madison, and as God-awful a place to her a Gopher Prairie. She was descended from the great Bishop Hugh Latimer and from Anne Bradstreet and John Cotton. What struck one immediately about her was her radiant presence: a great shock of golden hair falling free to her shoulders, gold with more life to it than auburn and more serenity than red; a radiant smile, full, warm, committed, trusting, guileless; a mellow, vibrant voice, the most earthy part of her, coming as if from the deep; a hearty laugh with a musical lift at the end; unusually large, observant eyes, always curious... a presence that would have made Blake sing.

Embellishments seemed false to her and demeaning. As a consequence, she wore no makeup or lipstick or high heels and only the most plain dresses, and her walk was very straight and direct, unself-conscious. Not that she was not womanly, but it was not in her nature to act any differently with men than with women. When we were together, Eros was in Blake country, and woman as Blake envisions her, but earthy and hale, was Margery herself.

From the start I was drawn into a deep relationship in which, to borrow Blake's imagery, our souls contemplated each other happily, sporting and embracing. She accepted everything I felt and imagined and aspired to and delighted in its uniqueness and gave it a radiant affirmation. Yet her conversation was not exceptional, but there was an overpowering depth and perspicacity in her intuitions which called for the same in me. I remember being with her one afternoon not long after we met. As I talked, I noticed that I was feeling extraordinarily free, as if for the first time I was in the presence of a *wholly* congenial soul.

This went to my head. As I talked on and the afternoon light became dimmer, time seemed to slow up. Deeper and deeper I probed for this other-soul until all restraint was gone and time stopped, for I found myself before the awful prospect of boundless potentialities on a universal scale. I seemed as if my understanding, deeply buried until then, could grasp *anything* in the world. I had to draw back: the scale was monstrous. But our spirits had been in a deep union and a quasi-supernatural force had been present.

Even in our pedestrian contacts her great confidence in my work shone on me like the sun. In fact, she was responsible for my first success. She had gone on before me to New York to look for a publisher for herself and had learned that Jane Heap had taken over as editor of the *Little Review,* in which Joyce's *Ulysses* was running serially at the time along with new work by Yeats, Pound, and Eliot, and that she was looking for new talent. Margery told me about it but I couldn't believe that could mean me. I

was only twenty-one. Except for a few poems in the *Nation,* nobody had heard of me. But Margery persisted: I ought to try. Finally one thing she said clicked: "Jane Heap", she said, "likes to meet young, unknown writers and just talk with them. Really!" That convinced me.

But how do you do this sort of thing? I didn't know anyone who knew her. Do you call in advance? I didn't have enough confidence for that. Margery kept reassuring me with an impish smile that all you had to do was walk in on her, that other young poets had done it, and that I was exactly the kind of person Jane Heap had in mind. She left me no choice. But what did I have to say that would be interesting to such an editor?

Apprehensive, I climbed the circular staircase one afternoon to the *Little Review* office, which was then in the Village. It was dark in the hallway. At one end on the first landing was a small white name-card, *THE LITTLE REVIEW,* and a push button under it. I rang the bell, there was silence for a moment, then the door opened and a pudgy figure appeared in a red velvet smoking jacket, smoking a small cigar, the face very round, the hair bobbed to look mannish. For a moment there was an astonishing resemblance to Oscar Wilde. It was Jane Heap.

This startling appearance, for some reason, at once put me at ease. I simply gave her my name and she invited me in. It was not an office at all but an apartment she shared with Margaret Anderson. She was pleasant, served tea, and we talked – she as to a fellow writer. I found myself stimulated and was not lacking for words. I remember our conversation as lively and straightforward. At the end, she said, "I suppose you brought something with you", and I said, "Yes", and pulled out a batch of poems from my coat pocket. She read them closely, thought for a few moments and then said, "We'll take these".

That was it. I was in. I had made it into that illustrious company! I got up and left right after that while I could still hold in my exultation. I wanted to get out of there fast before she changed her opinion of me, and rushed to tell Margery about it. She listened with a happy smile, relishing everything, my anxious climb up the stairs, the dark hallway, the surprisingly small, neat name-card on the wall, the sudden apparition of Oscar Wilde in the doorway, Jane Heap's simple courtesy, the quick way our conversation took off... the whole thing. "Oh Carlos", she said at the end, she called me Carlos when she felt affectionate, her voice dripping to that low, pulsating resonance so characteristic of her, as of no greater pleasure were possible to anyone. She had known this was going to happen.

Margery Latimer, Leon Herald, and I were a threesome at first. Kenneth Fearing joined us a bit later. Kenneth and I must have been together a lot in Madison. Charles J. Duffy, writing in the *Wisconsin Alumnus* in 1967, refers to us as "the Fearing-Rakosi circle", and recalled him with "his great shock of uncut, unkempt hair, which was the talk of the campus". As I write, I can hear his low, gravelly voice, like Humphrey Bogart's, and see again his thin, loose-jointed frame, the tiny, short-sighted eyes behind very thick glasses, and the familiar quizzical, amused look on his face, the limp, black hair falling low over his forehead, almost covering one eye. He seldom left his room. In one corner his dirty laundry lay piled up on the floor, chest-high. In the oth-

er, he reclined far back in his chair, almost on the small of his back, with his knees up. He was already a heavy drinker and did his writing at night with a bottle of whisky at his side and an unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, and slept all morning, skipping classes the next day, a bold thing to do in those days. He had admirers even then who hung around him, basking in his bohemian boldness and waiting for his next *bon mot*, which dropped in a flawless idiom sounding like Thomas Carlyle. When asked in the *Wisconsin Yearbook* for a summary of his achievement, he wrote, "Indian Reservation".

Madison in those days was a very clean, respectable small town of one-family homes with well-kept lawns. The University had some ten thousand students, mostly from Wisconsin farms and small towns, blond young Babbitts, their hair cropped close. Time was suspended for these boys and girls from the country while they looked each other over and saw that they were comely, and flirted and horsed around. And the big events were football and the Big Ten pennant ahead, and standing guard was a smugness hard to imagine these days, although Nancy Reagan comes pretty close to it.

Entered I, poor little Jewish boy, stewing in an inner life, sensitive, mystical, full of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, feeling as if I had been branded by a stigma. Duffy in the *Wisconsin Alumnus* recalled me as "a little fellow with an intense manner and tragic eyes" and my verse as "soulful". I myself had this to say in 1923 for the contributor's column of *Palms,* a little magazine published in Mexico.

> I am sure sex chose me for destruction; that my tropsemitic savoir will defeat itself in the way a poetic technique, too conscious of its facture, defeats itself. Since 1920 I have tried to fend off oblivion and the domination of trifles and quasi- poets by a life of exact ritual. Nothing can convince me that my passive attention will not sometimes surprise depth and novelty; nothing but a feeling of non-existence, a humour of calculation. Yet can these defining words frame anything but the words, *Carl Rakosi?*

And an early poem, "Orphean Lost", recalls my deepest inner tone then:

> The oak boughs of the cottagers
> descend, my lover,
> with the bestial evening.
> The shadows of their swelled trunks
> crush the frugal herb.
> The heights lag
> and perish in a blue vacuum.
>
> And I, my lover,
> skirt the cottages,
> the eternal hearths and gloom
> to animate the ideal
> with internal passion.

The bestial evening of alienation and insecurity of mysterious depths and longing. With that, I graduated in 1924 and reentered the world of work.

A grim prospect faced me. I had not prepared for either a profession or a trade and the moment of truth had come, as my father knew it would but could not persuade me. It gripped me in the gut. What was I going to do? Who would want me? The labor market was tight, and my folks had done as much as they could and as much as I had a right to expect. I was on my own. On my own! For the rest of my life? A great dread and a revulsion as from nausea swarmed up in me. This passed, subsumed in the ordinary business of figuring out what to do, inquiring of people, doing things.

Into this hopper dropped a rumor that social work was looking for people to train, men in particular. The American Association of Social Workers was interviewing applicants in Chicago. Social work? The term was new to me. As I didn't know anything about it, I didn't know whether I had anything to offer but it was the only opening and I was willing to try anything and went for the interview, without being able to prepare in any way for it. As it turned out, I didn't need any preparation.

The nature of social work immediately became apparent: I was treated with great respect as if I were a precious commodity. The interviewer asked me a few simple questions to sound out my feelings about people, conveying in his tone that this was not an intellectual activity in which I was expected to come up with the right answer. In that sense, there was no right answer. So nobody was going to criticize me. It was just that I had something important to say and he was eager to hear it. All I had to do was be myself and look inside and tell what I thought and felt. There was plenty of time. It was very quiet as I looked inside and spoke. Would I be willing to go through the two years it would take to finish my training? he asked. Would I be willing to go to Cleveland, where there was an opening with the Associated Charities? Sure. (I would have gone anywhere; it was a way to see the country.) I was hired on the spot. Thus, I did not have to return to Kenosha to live off my parents in shame, like a child, which for a while I was afraid might happen.

The Associated Charities needed a trainee right away, so I moved at once to Cleveland. This was 1924, before a professional postgraduate curriculum and faculty for social work had been developed in universities. One was just starting at Western Reserve in conjunction with the Associated Charities. Members of the agency's supervisory staff taught courses in theory part of the time and supervised and helped the trainees with their cases the rest of the time. The trainee was paid a modest salary. I found the courses rather dull but immediately became deeply involved with my clients, more deeply and disinterestedly than I had ever been involved with anyone before. And I discovered in myself a great urge to listen deeply to their distress, to understand it, my *whole* attention in it, and be helpful. In this I discovered a great excitement and a gay self-fulfillment unknown to me before.

However, I was still a writer and my heart was set on living in New York, there was no other place for a writer to be, that was the epicenter, where things would happen. With my brief Cleveland experience as a credential I was able to get a job in New York with the Jewish Board of Guardians, a psychiatric social service for disturbed and delinquent boys, and left the Associated Charities after a few months, to the dis-

appointment of the executive, who was the only man on the staff and had been looking forward to having another man to be with and talk to occasionally.

New York was all I expected and I learned a great deal of Freudian theory in my new agency, which had the best clinical reputation in the country at the time, but I had to give it up. It was too much of a good thing, too absorbing, too demanding, too rigorous. It was making it hard for me to write. I decided I would try something less demanding. I would study psychology and go into personnel work. And that's what I did. I went back to Madison and got an M. A. in educational psychology. I was unsure about this, however, and thought that if that didn't work out, I'd fall back on university teaching, and with that in mind, I changed my name legally to Callman Rawley. For one thing, Rakosi was forever being mispronounced and misspelled, but the main reason was that I didn't think anyone with a foreign name would be hired, the atmosphere was such in English departments in those days. I kept Rakosi as my pen name, however, and no one who knew me as one, knew me as the other. This suited my purpose, as I didn't want professional colleagues to know that I was a writer. It was not just that I wanted to keep that private: I thought it would color and contaminate their perception of my understanding and practice of the profession. I saw no point in their knowing in any case. In later years, after I had retired and was using Rakosi again in daily contacts, I forgot sometimes by which name I had introduced myself to a person and had to keep my mouth shut until I got a clue from the conversation as to which it was.

With my new degree I got a job with the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company in their personnel department, testing motormen. Physical equipment was used, simulating the equipment on a streetcar, and a projector flashed street scenes on a screen, cars and people darting in and out unexpectedly. I checked the motorman's responses... his speed, accuracy, endurance, and the like, and made out a psychological profile from that. And on that the poor fellow's employment or future in the company depended.

This was not a function that interested me for long... neither did the city of Milwaukee... and I left after a year and picked up a job as psychologist in the personnel department of Bloomingdale's department store in New York. Here I was entirely on my own. Nobody paid the slightest attention to me. The store had never had a psychologist before and the store superintendent who had hired me assumed if I was a psychologist, I knew what a psychologist should be doing in a department store. He didn't know. He was a merchandiser. So I had to figure it out, and I was beginning to – starting with a plan to make a job analysis of every position in the store – when a poor Christmas season stopped it all, and the superintendent was fired right after Christmas, and I and a host of others along with him. That ended my career in industrial psychology.

Under the circumstances, I naturally fell back on what I knew, social work, this time in Boston with the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a very oldfashioned name for a very fine children's protective agency which was a working adjunct of the juvenile court, of which I was an agent. As such, I had police

powers to force entry into a home where there was evidence of child neglect or abuse. I never had to use this power but I did threaten to use it once in a particularly egregious case and felt ashamed at what I had done because when the children's mother, a washed-out, copped-out young woman, finally opened the door to admit me when I threatened to call the police if she didn't, I found the father, a small, wiry Portuguese workingman cowering in a closet like a rat. I was agitated by the indignity I had forced on him but the children were in great peril and I had to remove them into the custody of the court, the mother standing by, weeping and drunk, the father glowering and threatening. There was nothing else I could have done. The situation was too far gone to be helped.

A calm, benign spirit presided over this court, the whitehaired, elegant judge Cabot, of the Boston Cabots. Everything about his person was aristocratic but when he was talking to a child, you didn't see that, you saw only how considerate and sensitive and sagely proportioned he was and glowing with kindness.

Again I felt the need to protect my time and resources for writing by work that was less compelling, less absorbing. I thought the other route, university teaching, would be easier and less demanding, so I left Boston and got myself a job as an instructor in English at the University of Texas, teaching freshman composition to engineering students, a cruel assignment, and taking graduate courses in the department towards a Ph.D.

But this didn't work out either. The work was easier, all right, and there was time for my writing, but now it was the young prigs in the department I couldn't stand. They acted as if they had brought Oxford to Austin, and unlike young professors these days, were so affected and British high-toned that I felt nauseated and was faced with having to spend the rest of my life with clones. I could see too that what I would be doing as a professor would be so specialized and of so little value except in English departments that I would be like Tom in the old English joke:

> **"What are you doing, Jack?"**
> **"Oh, nothing."**
> **"And what are you doing, Tom?"**
> **"I'm busy helping him."**

So I called it quits after a couple of years and entered law school, but I didn't go far there either, not because I didn't find it interesting... on the contrary, I was captivated by the insistent practical base of jurisprudence and found the logical and philosophical reasoning supporting it as clear and well-proportioned as the Parthenon... but because for me to stand up and speak in public was nerve-wracking then, an ordeal, and I realized too late that that's what a lawyer did. The sons of instant Southern oratory in the huge class in which I was called on to stand up and analyze a case and found myself tongue-tied, were waiting, rarin' to go to do just that the moment I sat down.

No contest. I wasn't going to throw myself into that pit of crocodiles. So again I had to change course. This time I decided to go for broke. Why not become a psychia-

trist? Wasn't the study of human nature and therapy what I was most interested in? Psychiatry would give me the best opportunity to keep my working hours down, plus a good income and prestige. So I took the required chemistry, biology, and physics in Austin and entered the medical school in Galveston. I was immediately engulfed in the maddest race in my life for facts, physical facts that were perfectly within my power to memorize but only if I slaved away at it every day, Sundays included, until one or two in the morning. I did it, along with the other students, and probably would have found the second year a little easier, but my money ran out and I had no one to borrow from. The dean was sympathetic and wanted me to continue but the medical school had no financial loans for needy students at that time, so at the end of the year I had to give up. I had only one tiny pleasure to remember the experience by: I had gotten the highest grade in the anatomy class, a 98. How tenancious the memory can be when it has to.

After teaching for two years in a high school in Houston and working in a settlement house with Mexicans, I rode back north to Chicago on freight cars, partly for the experience, partly to save money. It was during my worst feeling of debacle in Houston that I received an invitation from Louis Zukofsky to rush him my best poems for a special issue of *Poetry* which he was editing under the sponsorship of Ezra Pound. Here began my association with him and with two of the others in that issue and, later, in *An "Objectivists" Anthology,* George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff. Zukofsky called us Objectivists. We are still known by that name.

It is now 1932. The Great Depression has set in and I'm back in social work in Chicago, working for the Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare. People are desperate. For example, one day I'm out making home visits and when I return to the office, I find that an agitated client waiting for word of his eligibility for financial assistance has stabbed a case worker to death in the waiting room. At the Depression's most desperate point, a million men a day, it was estimated, were on the move, going from city to city by freight cars, looking for work. My poem "New Orleans Transient Bureau" is drawn from my experience as case-work director in the New Orleans Transient Bureau in 1933, one of the transient bureaus set up by the federal government in large cities to try to deal with the problem.

In 1935 I left the South for good and spent the next five years in New York, working for the Brooklyn Jewish Family Welfare Society, which had a staff of brilliant practitioners and theoreticians then, among them Dr. M. Robert Gomberg. He and I were the first in our field and in psychiatry to conceptualize and practice family therapy, as against individual therapy. During this time, too, I pursued my graduate studies in social work seriously and received a Master of Social Work degree in 1940 from the University of Pennsylvania.

Living through the Great Depression I had become convinced by 1935 that capitalism was incapable of providing jobs and justice to people and that the system had to be changed, that there was no other way. Normally, this would have remained in my mind as just an idea, but I was seeing a lot of Leon Herald, my old friend, then. He was a starry-eyed Communist from way back, and prodded and cajoled me until I ven-

tured in, hesitantly. I found the best minds in my agency already in. After a couple of years, however, I stopped going to meetings, and that ended it. Nobody noticed because all I had ever done was listen, and march occasionally on picket lines with people I didn't know, and cheer and feel uplifted at mass rallies.

In 1938 I met Leah Jaffe. I liked her immediately. We were married in 1939. A few years ago, in a letter, Cid Corman had remarked that he couldn't visualize Leah or me without each other, and I, to confirm that there was a solid base to that, wrote back that ours must be one of the great marriages of all time. When I told Leah what I had written, she looked at me in disbelief. I was startled. Didn't she believe the same thing? I examined her face. It looked serious. But something told me she was going to lower the boom on me. With a straight face, after a moment of suspense, she said, "If you felt that way, why don't you bring me more presents?" We burst out laughing. She has a great spirit of fun. You can see why, in the words of young Mozart to his father, I hope she lives "till there is nothing more to be said in music".

By 1939 writing was coming harder and slower to me as more of me became involved in social work and in reading and writing professional articles... I wrote some sixty... and my evenings were swallowed up by the things that a man who is not a writer normally spends his time on in a big city: the theater, concerts, professional meetings, friends, girlfriends. It was impossible to pile on top of this daily regimen a night of writing. When I tried it, I turned into such a live wire that I could neither sleep afterward nor do my work right the next day. In addition, my Marxist thinking had made me lose respect for poetry itself. So there was nothing to hold me back from ending the problem by stopping to write. I did that. I also stopped reading poetry. I couldn't run the risk of being tempted.

When it came to me what I had done, that there would be no more writing in my life, I was stricken by what Kierkegaard, for a different reason, had called a "sickness unto death". Living became a dreadful existential state, something grey and purposeless between living and dying, and so physical that for a while I was sure I was going to die. This lasted about two years and then stopped, and I went on with my life as a social worker and therapist. This was 1940. The next year my first book, *Selected Poems,* was published.

In 1940 we moved to St. Louis, where my daughter, Barbara, was born. Here until 1943 I worked as case-work director of the Jewish Social Service Bureau. Then on to Cleveland as case-work director of Bellefaire, a residential treatment centre for disturbed children. My son, George, was born here. And finally on to Minneapolis where for twenty-three years I was executive director of the Jewish Family and Children's Service.

Towards the end of this period, in December 1965, I received an unexpected letter. As it changed the course of my life a second time, I quote it in full. It came from a young English poet studying under Charles Olson at the University of Buffalo.

> **Please excuse me if I make any intrusion upon your privacy but I would like to write to you about the poems you published under the name Carl Rakosi. I have your address from the Hennepin Country Welfare Department, to which I wrote at the suggestion of Charles Reznikoff in New York.**

I have been interested in your poems since I saw your name mentioned by Kenneth Rexroth some three years ago, but until I came here last autumn was only able to turn up "A Journey Away" printed in *Hound and Horn*. I have now been able to find about eighty poems of yours, published between 1924 and 1934, and what immediately strikes me is the discrepancy between that body of work and your *Selected Poems*. And the way, say, long poems like "The Beasts" and "A Journey Away" are chopped up into smaller units in that volume.

I wonder, too, why you have stopped publishing since 1941 and whether you have been writing since then or not.

Again, please excuse me if this letter is an impertinence, but I like and admire your poems very much and feel impelled to write to you now, my interest is so engaged with them.

Yours sincerely, Andrew Crozier.

I almost wept when I received this. It made me start writing again. I have been at it ever since.

Space now compels me to end. Looking back, it seems to me that three things in my life have made a man of me... humane, that is... the example of my father, social work, and Leah. Not poetry. I had to struggle to make a man of it. I see too that what I have related are mostly my difficulties and shortcomings, not my achievements and pleasures. My sense as a writer must have guided my hand in this.