

FDR AND ME

Raoul Felder

Contemplating the observation "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," I am perfectly comfortable in agreeing with Mr. Tolstoy in this regard. If I run into him, I will happily tell him so since I am an expert on the subject. The subject of unhappiness, I mean, not Tolstoy.

My mother was born in London and my father in Vienna. The two cities are 795.355 miles apart and, obviously, my parents never met each other until they came to America. Their two families managed to come from identical types of slums in Vienna and London and ended up in the same kind of slum in Brooklyn. In Vienna, London and Brooklyn, Yiddish was the lingua franca of the neighborhood. It was not so in my house. We spoke English unless my parents said something they did not want us to understand, then they reverted to Yiddish.

I use the word *house* in its broadest possible way. It was, in fact, a second-floor apartment of four rooms: a kitchen, a living room, where my grandfather slept each night after he sustained a heart attack, a small bedroom in which my mother and father slept and a bedroom that my brother and I shared. The apartment was up two flights of stairs. There was an elevator in the building that was broken much of the time. It was the only residential elevator in the neighborhood and as matter of fact, in the whole of Williamsburg. It was essential that we live in a building with an elevator because my brother could not walk. When the elevator was out of order, which was most of the time, he had to pull himself up one step at a time while I held one of his crutches. If he came home very late or in the early morning hours of the next day, as was often the case, he had to climb the stairs himself. There were of course, no cell phones to call someone to offer help and if he was too tired to pull himself up the stairs, he would wait at the foot of the stairs until morning. But I am getting ahead of myself.

My father had tried different ways to make a living. He was an excellent student with great powers of concentration that unfortunately were not passed on to me. He was a professional man, which immediately, when the Depression came, set him apart from the titular heads of other families in the neighborhood.

He could not afford to go to medical school, so he became a veterinarian. But it was the wrong time and the wrong trade. The time was

the Depression, and horses were on the way out and dogs were just on the way in. The problem was that in our impoverished neighborhood, people could not afford pets. Also, the myth was that religious Jews were forbidden to keep dogs as pets. They would say, "It's in there in black and white," pointing down to an imaginary Bible held open in the palm of their left hand, the index finger of their right hand pointing at the nonexistent book. However, I suspect the problem was poverty and not the Talmud, or perhaps the fact that dogs were considered not edible may have also played a role.

The truth is, as soon as a Jewish father made some money, the first thing he did was to drive to New Jersey and buy his child a Shih Tzu for five hundred dollars from a gentile breeder—an acceptable way of joining the American middle class. I never had a dog and never wanted one, except to this day, whenever I see a good-looking woman with a tiny dog, for some inexplicable reason, I think of sex.

My father was spectacularly unsuccessful as a veterinarian, except for the time at the beach when a big howling dog had gotten a large fishing hook caught in its throat, he walked straight up to the beast that stood as high as his waist, patted it on its head and simply pulled the hook out to the cheers and applause of the other beachgoers. I was very proud of him that day.

My father then became a lawyer. Being a lawyer in an impoverished neighborhood did not make much difference from being a veterinarian in an impoverished neighborhood except it gave my father an opportunity to run in the primaries for public office, everything from municipal court judge to congressman. All, of course, unsuccessfully.

When I mention "titular" head of a family, I use the word by serious if not painful choice. My mother, because of her ability to earn and borrow money, was the real head of our family. In peacetime she was the director of various enterprises, the largest being a significant old-age home and hospital, and in wartime, she ran a defense plant and a large Red Cross facility. In these endeavors she was usually able to provide jobs for various members of her and my father's family. As she succeeded in her various positions, my father receded both in terms of authority and influence in our family.

Before 1925, each summer with some degree of increasing regularity, polio epidemics were modestly reported in the press. However, by the summer of 1925, polio had become a national scourge. So great was its ability to frighten the general population, it became the stuff of newspaper headlines. Something in the order of "Twenty New Cases of Polio in Queens" or "The Epidemic Hits Coney Island Beachgoers."

To avoid this twentieth-century plague, parents with means sent

their young children to summer camps on the theory that this would put distance between their children and the deadly virus. The only thing wrong was the theory.

Eighty years later, the scientists discovered that one of the worst places a person could be in this epidemic was in the country.

In country and resort areas, for drinking purposes, the water table had to be tapped and it then flowed up into the wells. But it also contained natural contaminants that included quantities of the submicroscopic poliovirus. This allowed the country people to gradually develop an immunity to polio. When city people went to the resort areas, many were stricken since *their* drinking water back home had been delivered to them though pipes carrying decontaminated water.

In the summer of 1931, when my brother was nine years old, somehow, my mother was able to find enough money to send him to camp in far-off Connecticut. She was even able to pay for her sister's child to go to the camp. There, my brother caught polio. This became a defining event in all our lives.

Our cousin, a venomous creature, also was afflicted in a minor way and he was left with a very slight limp. I have heard him tell strangers it was a war wound. Later on, he gave himself the rank of major, which he asked me to call him whenever we met strangers.

My brother's illness was about as bad as it could be without killing him. Why does an affliction strike down a good person and give a pass to a bad person? There is no answer. Such things are the stuff of happenstance and cruel chaos. Ask King Lear, he had the same question, except better said.

From the time I was very young until my brother died, he could only get around with braces and crutches and, later in life, when the flame of youth was diminished, only in a wheelchair. In my household we never mentioned the events surrounding my brother's acquiring polio other than some few times and it was always prefaced by, "When Jerome got sick . . ." My grandfather: "When Jerome got sick, my hair turned white overnight."

The treatment in those days was horrendous in the physical pain and social isolation it caused. Because of the doctors' lack of knowledge about the deviousness of the evil bit of virus that caused polio and its plan of invasion and because of the fear of contagion, while the children received treatment, parents were forbidden to visit with them. The parents were kept behind glass windows, relegated to waving at them. But of course, the children were encased in iron lungs with all but their head exposed and could only see the tiny bits of ceiling directly overhead.

An iron lung was a large cylinder of rough iron very much like the

hot-water tank in an apartment house. It was studded with rivets and had an opening at one end for a patient's head while his entire body and neck was encased within the machine. The machine took over breathing for a patient who could no longer do so on his or her own. It did this by alternating pressure inside the device, thereby causing the patient's chest to rise and fall—to inhale and exhale. This went on until the rampage of the disease ran its course and then the victim could be taught to breathe without the machine again.

When my brother left the lung, there were gross manipulations of his legs that were painfully sensitive to the touch of just a bedsheet or a soft hand and also, while he was helpless, there were beatings by other boys ahead of him in the treatment regime. And then, the active part of the disease was over, like a retreating, marauding army, it left destruction and devastation in its wake. My brother's body from the waist down was paralyzed. He had to learn to walk with crutches and braces. *Walking* would be too generous a word to describe his method of propulsion. The irony of it was that much of the world ultimately danced to my brother's music and sang his songs. One of his songs was "Save the Last Dance for Me."

We shared a bedroom for twenty years and he was my mother, father, teacher, brother, best friend and confessor. I thought he had no secrets from me, yet he never mentioned, nor did my mother, those early awful rehabilitative events of his life when recovering from the assault of polio. Never, even in those dreadful moments when from the prison of his bed he screamed obscenities at my mother because there was no one else that was left who would receive them. They were always very close, especially in the later years, when she heard his songs played on the radio and she knew they had won.

* * *

My family died in the natural order of such things. First my father, then my mother and finally my brother. My mother died over thirty years ago. When she died, my best recollection of those sad days was that I kept none of her things and gave them to my niece, my brother's daughter. She'd lived with my mother for much of the time growing up, and I knew they loved each other very much. It seemed to me it was what my mother would have wished.

* * *

About three months ago, I attended a birthday party for my two-year-old grandson. Between smaller children who, like large cockroaches,

were scuttling across the floor at great speed and those a little older barely able to walk and staggering around like little Frankensteins and a cacophony like the playing of dozens of discordant violins and the squealing of children, I found a quiet corner and chatted with my niece, who is now a woman in her early fifties. She said, "I have been going through Grandma's things and I found this. It's on my phone. I took a picture of it." She handed me her cell phone. I held it in my hand and continued the conversation. After a few minutes, I realized I still had it in my hand. I looked down at the screen of the cell phone and saw it was a photograph of a letter. It was typed on a yellowed-by-time sheet of fragile-looking stationery. It was somewhat frayed at its edges, with a brownish line where it had remained folded for the last eighty-seven years. The date typed on the letter was January 12, 1932. There was also a photograph of the postmarked envelope in which it had been sent. The addressee was my mother, who lived at 65 Manhattan Avenue in Brooklyn. My family lived there and then moved to 75 Manhattan Avenue because it had an elevator that would make going into our second-floor apartment less of a struggle for my brother.

I am by no means a scholar but rather a student of the years 1937 through 1943, because at some point in the past, I believed that the events of these years would control those of the next hundred years. Towards this belief, I have hoarded and read hundreds of contemporaneously published *Life* and *Time* magazines and devoured probably hundreds of books and articles on my journey into gentle madness in dealing with this particular subject matter.

I therefore immediately recognized the signature on the letter. I'd seen photographs of it hundreds of times. The letter read:

My dear Mrs. Felder:

I am very sorry to hear about your little boy and am taking the liberty of sending your letter to Dr. Michael F. Hoke, the physician in charge of the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation at Warm Springs, Georgia. I have asked Doctor Hoke to write you in regard to your child. I do hope his condition will improve soon.

Very sincerely yours,

[signed] Franklin D. Roosevelt

A copy of this letter is at the end of this story.

Approximately eleven months after writing this letter, its author was elected the thirty-second president of the United States.

My daughter just had a book published containing many photographs. She was recommended to a specialty house that deals in duplicating delicate works of photographic art. I hired them and through some sort of modern magic they were able to remove the brown line without damaging the document.

There, under a big glass, we could see on the center of the downstrokes made by the pen point a faint lightening of the ink in a straight line. It occurred because the two halves of the thin metal met along the centerline of the pen point. This was common in those days when a long-handled desk pen was dipped into an inkwell. Indeed, I have seen formal photographs of the president at his desk in the Oval Office holding this sort of pen.

Although I believed we had no secrets from one another, my brother never mentioned to me that he had been to Warm Springs. But I recall that once lowered into a swimming pool, he was a strong swimmer, as was the president. I now believe they both must have learned to swim in the tepid waters of Warm Springs utilizing only their powerful shoulders and arms without the assistance of their legs. In one of the *Time* magazines, I remember a reference to the president's "massive shoulders" as he sat behind his desk in the Oval Office. I suppose the development of their arms and shoulders occurred because of the needed use of crutches and this then enabled them to propel their bodies in water. Once, we measured the size of my brother's biceps and they measured the same as those of heavyweight champion Joe Louis. When my brother bought a house, priority was given to the installation of a swimming pool.

My mother never mentioned Warm Springs to me except for once, and it was when I was an adult. It must have been when Eleanor Roosevelt died. I do remember it was in the fall or early winter and we walked in silence and then sat on a bench. Both of us were quiet. After a while, my mother, as if continuing a conversation that had just taken place in her mind, said to me, "She was a very great lady." She paused a few moments and then speaking to herself as much as to me, said quite softly in an almost dreamlike way, "When the president came to Warm Springs, there was always, you know, lots of excitement. It was Thanksgiving and dinner was in a large room. It was filled with the children and Mr. Roosevelt was there as host, carving the big turkey. I was looking into the room to keep an eye on Jerome and, of course, to see the President.

"Mrs. Roosevelt had been just going into the dining room. She saw me. We were perfect strangers to each other. She asked me why I was looking into the dining room. I said my boy was inside and I wanted to watch him and, besides, the room was filled. She said to me, 'Your place

is with your boy. Come in with me.' She took me by the arm, and we entered the room together."

It was a bewildering thing to hear her say this. She did not speak for a few minutes and after a while we both stood up and continued walking in silence.

I never brought up the subject again.

I did not know what to think at the time. From what I previously had read, I knew the connection between Warm Springs and the president. He had purchased the place because of the natural mineral springs that were a constant ninety degrees and he kept the pool at this temperature and, in fact, he ultimately died there in a cottage the press named the Little White House.

So much was happening to me and the world in the intervening years that I buried the conversation with my mother where things inexplicably lie sleeping in my brain. I knew that the reality was that in those early days of my brother's illness, travel and the expense attendant to a stay in Warm Springs was an economic impossibility.

In fact, there was a mention of my brother's stay in Warm Springs in only one paragraph of a biography published after his death. But in the almost quarter of a century that I shared a room with my brother and aside from my mother's one brief recollection, I never heard any mention of the president or my brother in Warm Springs. I knew there was simply not enough money available to make it happen unless, of course, there was the fantasy of an anonymous benefactor, perhaps one in a high place, that had made it possible.

President Roosevelt's importance in the social fabric of America cannot be overstated. He led a transformation of the world as we know it. He was the president that saw us through the Great Depression and the Second World War, which in its scope and breadth was, as one historian has written, "the greatest event in the history of the world."

Today when entering some homes, one might find hanging a portrait of Martin Luther King, or the pope, or Mike Tyson, or Joe DiMaggio, or John Kennedy, or Mother Teresa, or the rock star du jour, or even Jesus. But, in those desperate days, almost *every* home, and in schools, hospitals, barrooms, and gas stations, and most public places that had wall space, was a copy of a formal portrait of President Roosevelt. He had been the only president that a large portion of Americans had ever known.

Time magazine on its cover named Winston Churchill as man of the half-century, but it should be fairly remembered that without President Roosevelt disregarding all the polls and, with great skill, slowly moving this country towards preparedness for an inevitable war, there would have been no Churchill on *Times'* cover.

Me, I keep a photocopy of Mr. Roosevelt's letter to my mother in the inside pocket of my jacket at all times as a talisman against bad deeds. Between the president and my mother, how can I lose? ■



STATE OF NEW YORK
EXECUTIVE CHAMBER
ALBANY

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
GOVERNOR

January 12, 1932.

Mrs. Millie Felder,
65 Manhattan Avenue,
Brooklyn, New York.

My dear Mrs. Felder:

I am very sorry to hear about your little boy and I am taking the liberty of sending your letter to Dr. Michael F. Hoke, the physician in charge of the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation at Warm Springs, Georgia. I have asked Doctor Hoke to write you in regard to your child. I do hope his condition will improve soon.

Very sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Franklin D. Roosevelt".