

A conversation with Judy Polumbaum
author of *All Available Light: The Life and Legacy of Photographer Ted Polumbaum*
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How did your father become a photojournalist?

The short version: He was propelled by principle, conscience, indignation, foolhardiness, the need to make a living, and my mother.

The longer version: My dad had a photography hobby as a kid – one of his few pursuits that his aloof businessman father actually encouraged. But Ted Polumbaum never planned to make photography his life's work. He wanted to be a news reporter.

After college, he worked for a great little newspaper in Pennsylvania, the *York Gazette and Daily*, known as a training ground for journalists headed to bigger places. My mother, Nyna Brael Polumbaum, hated York, which unlike its forward-thinking daily was a hidebound place, so they stayed only two years before returning back north. New York newspapers were merging and laying off veteran staffers, so no luck there. Ted found a mind-numbing job in Boston that seemed like it might lead to something better, writing news copy and editing photos for an outfit called Acme Newspictures, which soon got bought by United Press. My dad's main job at UP was rewriting wire stories into the evening newscast for television – a medium so new that my parents didn't even own a TV.

In the spring of 1953, a federal marshal came huffing up the steps to their second-floor apartment in a near-in suburb to deliver a subpoena from the US House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). It directed my father to report to Washington, D.C., to testify at hearings on "Communist subversion in education."

This was the so-called McCarthy period – but Joe McCarthy, who was looking increasingly unhinged and would be defanged within another year or so, was the least of it. HUAC had started much earlier, lasted much longer, and ruined far more lives. The dragnet had snagged my dad because, as a student at Yale after World War II, he'd joined the John Reed Club, an innocuous group whose main activity was inviting radical speakers to campus. It was on the list of supposedly dangerous organizations.

Ted reported to the hearings with a lawyer, and confronted the Committee in a performance that then looked reckless and now looks heroic. He took the Fifth Amendment (a more effective defense against these inquisitions than the First) and refused to answer questions about his political beliefs and associations; and he accused the congressmen (they were all men) of trampling on the Bill of Rights and subjecting him to trial by publicity. His defiance made the *New York Daily News* and *The New York Times*.

United Press promptly fired him. He was 28, married, with one daughter and another on the way (I was in the womb), and needed a new job. Dogged by the blacklist, trailed by the FBI, Ted decided to be upfront about his situation, and most interviews came to naught – except one prospect, writing catalog copy for a new outfit called Radio Shack. "That's what we want, a guy with balls!" the interviewers told him. The strong-willed Nyna knew he'd hate the job and insisted he decline.

So he returned to his childhood passion, which he'd never entirely set aside. He already had a good credential: The year before his HUAC appearance, he'd won a New England photo

contest for his images of picturesque Trappist monks at a monastery in Western Massachusetts. The prize was a future exhibit at the deCordova Museum outside Boston. To its credit, the museum came through even after the hearings, despite Ted's newfound notoriety. He stepped up his picture-taking, showed his portfolio around, and entered the freelancing world.

Meanwhile, the Newspaper Guild took up Ted's case, a welcome show of gumption in those intimidating times. The dispute dragged through arbitration and into court, where a judge friendly to United Press upheld the firing on a technicality (even though UP's own review of Ted's scripts from a period when the Korean War dominated the news had found no bias).

By then, three years had passed, and Ted's new career was taking off. His big break was *LIFE* magazine; founder Henry Luce, ignoring the blacklist, had empowered his editors to enlist the best talent money could buy. As a regular stringer for Time Inc. and other media, Ted would go on to complete about 400 assignments for *LIFE*, and hundreds more for *Time*, *Fortune*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New York Times* and its *Sunday Magazine*, and many other publications.

I originally thought of titling my book about my father's life and legacy *Photographic Justice*. Indeed, the good guy emerged with his integrity intact and a gratifying new career at which he excelled.

What kind of father was Ted Polumbaum?

I could go on and on about this. He was a wonderful father – loving, goofy, a lively storyteller, a great conversationalist. He was didactic about practical things, instructions for tying shoes or riding a bike, but Socratic about ideas, asking questions rather than imposing his views. Unlike many of the parents in the small town where I grew up, who were politically conservative (or at best, cautious), my parents were progressive activists, and my brother and I joked that our supposed friends really just came around to talk politics with our dad.

My father was terribly proud of his three children, and while he could be disapproving of my older sister and younger brother, he was ridiculously indulgent of me in particular. He liked to brag to other people about my phenomenal talents and abilities, and I found these tall tales mortifying, until I grew up and could start to appreciate his lavish acclaim.

As a straight white male born and raised before second-wave feminism, Dad was a beneficiary of the old divisions of household labor, with Mom doing most of the domestic work. But he probably contributed more in this realm than most men of his generation, and he and my mother switched up a lot of things – he cooked breakfast, she built stone walls. Beyond being my father's best photo editor, my mother was an artist and architect and rabble-rouser with her own projects. My parents always had adjoining studios.

What role did war play in your father's life

He despised war, although he'd done his patriotic duty during World War II as an Army private in the Signal Corps in New Guinea and the Philippines. He didn't talk much about his service – other than one story he liked to tell, of the time he and a buddy brought two officers from a Black unit back through the jungle to watch a movie with their white unit, thus integrating the Army for one night some years before President Truman's executive order to end segregation in the military.

My dad rejoiced along with his compatriots at the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, knowing they'd soon go home instead of invading Japan. But he later came to see those actions as war crimes. He became a peacenik. In 1961, when my family was living abroad, Time Inc. sent him on a side trip to take pictures in Southeast Asia, and he got early inklings of growing US involvement in Vietnam. Once we got back to the US, he and my mom immediately set up living room meetings. They and other peacenik friends helped turn much of my small hometown west of Boston against the Vietnam War.

As a photojournalist, my dad occasionally covered stories involving death and destruction, but he never returned to a combat zone. He greatly admired the photographers risking their lives for images of conflict, but never sought to cover war. He did make it a point, however, to photograph as many protests as he could – thankfully, because media often disregarded the civil rights and antiwar movements, especially early on, and civic protest was not as amply documented as it is today.

How much did Ted's being Jewish mean to him, and what place did religion have in your upbringing?

Ted was a secular Jew; therefore, he couldn't conform to the perfect "pale, male, and Yale" stereotype, which was WASP. He was raised in an assimilationist family that celebrated Christmas and was pretty loose with Jewish traditions (in contrast to my mother's immigrant parents, who were steeped in Jewish culture, although also secular). But being Jewish inevitably was part of his ascribed identity.

When he entered Yale as a freshman, he was part of an unacknowledged Jewish quota (and as the brainy son of a wealthy father, an obvious choice to fill one of those limited slots). He was drafted out of his first year of college, and when he returned after the war to finish up, things had changed a lot; for one thing, many more Jews were on campus under the GI Bill.

Religion, and anything related to it, was pretty much nonexistent in my home. Growing up, my siblings and I never knew what the holidays would bring – my parents were totally mixed up about Christmas and Hanukkah, sometimes selectively attentive, sometimes entirely neglectful. Over time, we got used to this lackadaisical approach; my household practices such a system to this day.

We never entered houses of worship unless it was to broaden our horizons in other countries or for purposes of political expression in our own (to partake of Freedom School at a church in Roxbury, Boston's main Black neighborhood, or antiwar sermons at Arlington Street Church downtown).

My dad called himself a bad Jew; today he'd be more furious than ever at Israel, at the apartheid system that denies Palestinians dignity and territory, and at US support for Israeli militarism and injustice. I pretty much follow in his footsteps in this regard.

How did Ted's occupation as a photographer influence your family's daily life?

My sister and my brother and I grew up surrounded by his equipment and supplies – cameras (Leica, Nikon), lights, extension cords, "bricks" (20-packs wrapped in cellophane) of film stashed in the refrigerator, big rolls of background paper for studio shoots. I got to know his darkroom fixtures well – a hermetic back room for developing, with one red safelight and closets

for hanging wet film and prints; and the main room for printing, the long stainless steel trough lined with trays filled with chemicals, bamboo tongs to fish out the prints, and a little drum dryer to crisp up any prints needed immediately. Dad liked to jerry-rig things, so there was plenty of duct tape around. All this stuff seemed cool.

Even cooler were the pictures, both professional and personal, that emerged from my father's workshop. Although film from time-sensitive assignments typically went right to New York, he processed and printed a lot of his black-and-white jobs, as well as personal projects and family photographs. Point-and-shoot cameras were starting to come into use, but most people still relied on studios and school portrait shoots to produce the staid images they put on their walls or in albums. In contrast, Dad's photos of family members and friends were interesting compositions that told stories through light and shadow, action and stillness.

Because Ted was a freelancer without a real office and only a play-acting receptionist (Nyna), the telephone was his occupational lifeline. Long before phone answering machines came out as consumer products, we had a bulky reel-to-reel one rented from the phone company.

As a kid, I sometimes accompanied Dad on shoots around the Boston area – visiting filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's studio and wunderkind conductor Michael Tilson Thomas's apartment are two occasions that stand out. Later, when Ted started doing more commercial assignments and needed hired hands, I flubbed my tryout (unable to suffer my adoring father suddenly transformed into a boss), but my brother often assisted.

Of the three kids, I was the one who did the most photography – my father gave me a Brownie, then handed off a Nikon F, and pretty much raised me in a wet darkroom, teaching me to develop film and make prints. I was a competent photographer for a while, reaching my apex of achievement during high school.

What was Ted's philosophy of photography?

Ted saw himself as a journeyman, not an artist. On assignment, be it political campaign or medical breakthrough, fad or fashion statement, sports event or speech, his job was to bring in the pictures. He photographed lots of celebrities, but that wasn't his true interest; he far preferred documenting the lives and struggles of ordinary people. He also enjoyed whimsical street photography.

Dad didn't see photographs as unadulterated fact; he knew the eye behind the camera had a point of view. But he also felt that images to some extent had autonomous expressive power, so something of the truth would always come out. He had strong political convictions that he acted upon as an individual, but he didn't impose his views on the job or try to make subjects whose views he disagreed with look bad. The images could speak. He didn't discount words, however, and always provided caption details and contextual information. He saw each person as an individual, not to be subsumed by anonymous, symbolic representation, so whenever possible he recorded people's names.

His favorite photographer was W. Eugene Smith, a star *LIFE* staffer (whom Ted never met). Smith was a notoriously difficult character, and ultimately quit the magazine over differences with editors. Ted's personality could not have been more different; he got along with everyone, and left picture editing to the picture editors. But he admired Smith's deeply

humanistic approach to photography, and like Smith, sought to dignify ordinary people. He also liked Smith's aesthetic and preference for stark contrast, which he emulated in his printing.

Dad hated the paparazzi phenomenon, which was especially visible around coverage of the first family of Massachusetts, the Kennedys. *LIFE* often got exclusive access – and when subjects were elusive, he didn't chase people down. Sometimes an inanimate object would do: After Teddy Kennedy's car went into the drink and a woman died, Ted photographed the bridge at Chappaquiddick. When Jackie Kennedy was keeping vigil with her third child, who lived less than two days, he photographed the hospital wing from a building across the way.

Dad also loathed the syndrome of the celebrity photographer. Photos weren't about the picture-taker, they were about other people and the world out there.

He didn't hang out much with other photographers and had no interest in talking tech. But he was kind and encouraging toward younger photographers. Some of the assistants he hired to help lug equipment and handle lighting for commercial jobs consider him a valued mentor in life as well as in the trade.

After the big general-interest photo magazines had folded, unable to compete with TV for advertising, Ted's livelihood came to depend on what he called "corporate propaganda" – usually to illustrate glossy annual reports. Some friends accused him of selling out, but as he saw it, the vastly inflated payment now subsidized the documentary photography that remained his true passion.

Commercial work enabled him and my mother to turn a magazine assignment in Chile into a long-term historical project, culminating in a stunning book that chronicled a three-year socialist experiment, crushed by a military coup, and the country's painful return to democracy after a long period of dictatorship. His last couple of personal projects focused on trash collectors and union organizing.

Beyond photography and politics, what else interested Ted?

He was an avid, and pretty good, tennis player. One of the first signs of the mysterious brain ailment that ultimately killed him was his inability to send the tennis ball where he wanted. Boston is a sports-crazy town, and he photographed lots of sports, but tennis was the only sport he really liked to watch – mainly tournaments on TV with the volume turned off, and mainly, as the men's game came to depend on brute force, the more elegant women's game.

He read voraciously, mostly non-fiction. His all-time favorite books included *Das Kapital* and, after I gave him a copy, Julian Jaynes's *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. He kept works of history and literature from his Yale days, and doted on Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Walt Whitman. As native New Yorkers, my parents were addicted to *The New York Times*, to accompany the *Boston Globe*. Dad also subscribed to a roster of progressive publications – *I.F. Stone's Weekly* from its inception, *Monthly Review*, *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Ramparts* as long as it lasted.

Dad never totally retired, but Social Security, which he'd paid into through the decades of self-employment, enabled him to take fewer jobs. He signed up for adult education courses in creative writing – short stories, playwriting, and poetry that was a notch above the doggerel in which he'd always dabbled.

A band stalwart in high school, Dad's main instrument was clarinet. He loved Dixieland. If he could have been Benny Goodman, he wouldn't have been a photographer. But he wasn't that good.

Ted loved arguing – for fun. His most vehement debates were with some of his closest friends, people with whom he fundamentally agreed.

What was Nyna's influence on your father?

My mother was the provocateur and risk-taker. My father was inherently timid; she emboldened him to fight back against bullies, starting with HUAC, and pushed him to pursue adventure. When Dad's favorite uncle left him some money, it was my mother's idea to buy round-the-world plane tickets, rent out the house, pull my sister and me out of school and spend most of a year overseas. The longest stretch was in India, where my father truly found his strengths as a photographer.

My dad also gained wonderful in-laws by marrying my mom. Ted adored Nyna's father, a warm, funny, irrepressibly joyous freethinker, the absolute opposite of Ted's own stern, distant, conservative father. He died early, but Nyna's mother and stepfather lived into old age and were the most important relatives in our lives; they were generous beyond words, and helped my parents through the leanest and meanest of times.

Your older sister was diagnosed as autistic at a time when both experts and the general public were far less informed about autism. How did this affect Ted as well as the entire family?

Miki was a gorgeous but tempestuous toddler, and the autism diagnosis opened up a huge battlefield for my parents. The going theory of the self-appointed authorities was the "refrigerator mother" – maternal rejection said to be the root cause of my sister's odd behaviors, tantrums, delayed speech and other developmental lags.

My parents would have none of that. Long before any support systems existed – no special education classes, no autism advocacy organizations, no Americans with Disabilities Act – they had to fight the medical, psychiatric, and educational establishments. Miki proved to be able to learn (later called "high-functioning"), and my parents, especially my mother, pushed her to the utmost. They found a kindergarten that would take her, and then a private elementary school. By third grade, she was in the public schools ("mainstreaming" wasn't yet in the vocabulary either). She finished high school, went to an art college and became a silversmith, worked in customer service for a university press for many years, then became a piano-tuner. She lives an active and independent life, and belongs to a taekwondo dojang.

My parents never let Miki's difficulties dominate their attentions; the challenges were simply part of life, and didn't detract from their concern for me or my brother. It helped, though, that I was a pretty self-sufficient child. Miki actually was my first teacher: She brought all her lessons home and taught me to read before I even got to kindergarten.

We're all Miki's fans. While Nyna took on the bigger part of rearing her as Ted was building his career, he faithfully documented her beauty and her milestones through photography, and came to see her as a special gift. He could always make her laugh.

This book is a bit of a departure for you: In your academic career, you were known for your scholarship on Chinese journalism. What else do you have in store?

Indeed, I've written a great deal about contemporary China – not only journalism and media, but also law, politics, sports and culture. As a graduate student, I was the first Westerner in the post-Mao period to do fieldwork into Chinese journalism. As a professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Iowa, I authored many articles for academic journals, book chapters, and with a Chinese co-author, the book *China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

But as an unrepentant former newspaper reporter, I never stopped writing for newspapers and magazines, about China and many other topics. And I've actually been working on my father's story intermittently for twenty years, since his death in early 2001. When I retired from university teaching in 2015, my first order of business was to produce a photo book showcasing work from my father's archives – *Juxtapositions: Images from the NEWSEUM Ted Polumbaum photo collection* (Gao House Press, 2016). This new book about Ted's life and times, although not a photo book per se, also has a lot of pictures.

Upon publication of *All Available Light: The Life and Legacy of Photographer Ted Polumbaum*, I'm turning my attention to three remarkable years I spent in China, from mid-1979 to mid-1982, during the early years of that country's so-called "reform and opening." I taught journalism, edited copy for the English-language service of Xinhua News Agency, and wrote and edited features for the *China Daily* (now a media establishment behemoth, then a lively new upstart). I lived in Beijing, which still resembled a huge drowsy village – very different from the frenzied metropolis it has become. I traveled widely, and I married a dreamy, poetic Chinese man.

One chapter of *All Available Light* chronicles our exploits with my parents and brother when they came to visit in 1981. My next book will fill out the picture, drawing on files I've carted from place to place for the last forty years that include voluminous correspondence from the period. The tentative title is *Words Across Oceans: An Epistolary Memoir of a Changing China*.

I expect to do more with Ted Polumbaum's photographic legacy as well. Here's my chance to give a big shout-out to the Newseum, which acquired my father's archives after his death. The Newseum is best known for the gargantuan museum of news by that name that used to sit on the National Mall, right next to the Canadian embassy, until it closed at the end of 2019, the building sold to Johns Hopkins University to address financial problems. The organization remains an ongoing entity under the Freedom Forum, with online programming and other activities; and its collections remain intact and safe. The Ted Polumbaum archive is the Newseum's largest holding by an individual photographer, some quarter of a million images, with legacy materials – negatives, contact sheets, prints, tear sheets – preserved in a climate-controlled cooler, and digitizing underway. I've introduced some of it in two books, but far more of this historic treasure trove has yet to be shared.

Do you have a favorite Ted Polumbaum picture?

I do. It's not in this new book, but it's on page 23 of *Juxtapositions*. A Delhi street scene from our 1961 stay in India, showing a troupe of performers. At the center is a dancing girl,

bedecked in gauzy clothes and a veil, bells on her ankles. To one side, her male accompanists drum and chant. Shabbily-dressed onlookers, adults and children, are arrayed in a closely packed semicircle. The eye is drawn to one urchin in particular, a leggy young girl in a raggedy t-shirt and shorts, who eyes the dancer with an expression of adulation and envy. And one realizes that the street girl and the dancing girl are at the same lowly station in life, the only difference being their attire. It's an amazing scene, full of expressive faces. I have a framed print of it on my living room wall, and every time I look at it I find something more.

Ted's ventures into Coney Island off-season are great fun, and offer a curious inversion of my father's usual approach to photography: Rather than focusing on people and their agency, these photos emphasize the place. Coney Island in winter has a weird ambience that seems to dominate the humans in the frame.

Dad's Freedom Summer pictures are especially moving and significant.

So why tell Ted Polumbaum's story now?

First, the encounter with HUAC is instructive and relevant. Donald Trump adapted a great deal from the Joe McCarthy playbook (as the recent biography by Larry Tye shows) and reminded us of the dangers of demagoguery. The sort of mindless hysteria that HUAC fostered and thrived on has burgeoned anew. Like Ted Polumbaum, we need to stand up to it.

Second, I think it's useful to resurrect those pre-digital days, before cell phones and social media, before the universe was awash with images, when photography was special, and a compelling photo could rouse us to action or quiet us into contemplation. I want younger people to know that such an environment once existed.

More broadly, we live in tumultuous times, roiled with demands for social justice, political reform, economic redress, ecological recalibration, and all the other changes we need to survive as a species and a planet. My father would be right on board in building upon the movements he participated in and documented during the second half of the twentieth century. Ted's story, and the power of his pictures, can illuminate the enduring influence of the past upon the present and, I hope, further inspire those working for a better future. Idealistic, for sure, but that's also imprinted in my father's legacy.