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From A Small Town to Paris

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I grew up in a small town named Jackson (population about 2,000) in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in Northern California. My father was a car salesman and my mother was what used to be called a 'homemaker.' The town was in the middle of 'Gold Rush country.' The two gold mines on the outskirts of town, the Kennedy and the Argonaut, yielded some of the most impressive amounts of gold in the country, until they were shut down during World War II. My maternal great-grandparents arrived in Jackson in the early 1850s from Italy. The next two generations of grandfathers worked in the mines.

My father and my uncle, who had fought in the Second World War, reminisced about their first experience beyond the United States. My father fought in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. Preferring not to talk about his experiences, he probably suffered from what was then called 'shell shock,' which today is called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But my uncle, who was also in Europe but did not see combat, was much more loquacious. He would entertain my brother and myself with vivid stories about the life in wartime Europe. These reminiscences sparked my first interest with the world outside and its history.

As a young boy I developed a fascination with stamp collecting, an endeavor that has long since gone out of fashion. I would marvel at the depiction of past events and personalities of far-off places, many of which I had never heard of. This fascination led to my passion for international history, a term that did not exist at the time. When I obtained a stamp with the title "Magyar kir posta," I wanted to know what that referred to. There was no internet to consult. So I was delighted when a beloved aunt, who had come into some money from an inheritance from a distant cousin, bought me a complete set of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. These volumes gave me access to the history of all the countries in the world. After learning about the country of Hungary, I learned about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. And so on.

I moved to the city of Davis in the Sacramento Valley when I entered adolescence. My interest in stamp collecting soon began to disappear. But it was replaced by the excitement of having access to the presentations of scholars, including a number of historians, who had been invited to speak at the University of California at Davis.

My first mentor was a high school history and French language teacher in Davis named Fred Brandeis. He would invite some of his students to his house to discuss current and past international issues. After graduation I kept in touch with him and was profoundly influenced by our subsequent meetings in the little study at his house. He had been a young taxi driver in Paris in the early 1920s and reminisced about his experiences in the 'City of Lights.'

In 1962 I entered Stanford University on a full four-year scholarship. In the academic year 1964-1965 I attend that university's overseas campus at Tours, France, located southwest of the French capital. We were taken on field trips to other parts of that country and even to nearby countries such as Italy. Tours was an interesting city and was surrounded by the

lush agricultural area of the Loire River Valley. But as the old World War I saying went, “How ya gonna keep them down on the farm after they’ve seen Patee?” My fellow students—men and women—and I would hitchhike for the long weekends to Paris, where we stayed in cheap hotels and travelled the length and breadth of the city. Those two experiences got me ‘hooked’ on France in general and Paris in particular. In my senior year at Stanford I encountered another mentor, Professor Gordon Wright, who was the resident historian of modern France. I wrote an honors thesis under his supervision. His scrupulous attention to the thesis—whether vocabulary or the substantive material about which I wrote—demonstrated to me how a dedicated, caring professor can have a lasting impact on his students—even undergraduates.

After the end of my senior year I was invited to attend an ‘intellectual summer camp’ of sorts near Washington, D.C. called the Encampment for Citizenship. The group included a wide variety of young people from all walks of life who shared an interest in world affairs. We were transported to the nation’s capital to meet with a number of government officials and even a few senators to discuss matters of political importance.¹ I had been recruited to attend this event by a man named Allard K. Lowenstein who became my mentor, of sorts. He had briefly served as an associate dean at Stanford University and would return to campus periodically to inspire students to get involved in social and political causes. Whenever he arrived on campus, I would make a point of attending his presentations and discussing with him the issues he had raised. Whenever he spoke, he was always accompanied by a young student named Dennis Sweeney. To get ahead of my narrative, he would later orchestrate the “dump Johnson” movement in 1968 that led to the presidential candidacies of Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. In March 1980 Al was assassinated by his former acolyte Sweeney, who had become mentally ill and suspected that Lowenstein was out to get him.²

As a fourth-generation Californian I decided to ‘go east young man,’ reversing the advice attributed (probably erroneously) to the newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, and attend the Ph.D. program at Columbia University in 1966. While there I encountered two professors who became my mentors at the university: Jacques Barzun and Robert Paxton, the first and second readers of my dissertation, respectively. For different reasons both professors nurtured my interest in the history of France. To say that I was intimidated by Jacques Barzun would be a gross understatement. He was the author of more than forty books on an incredibly wide range of subjects: classical music, educational theory, science, philosophy, detective fiction, racism, to name a few, and somehow found time to serve as Provost of the university.³

Robert Paxton had arrived at Columbia a few years before I graduated in 1971. He was a very careful reader of my dissertation, correcting a number of exaggerations and misstatements. In the next year he published his ground-breaking book *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, which generated a huge controversy—particularly in France—because it demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that the collaborationist French government installed after the German defeat of France in the spring of 1940 had exceeded the demands of its German Nazi occupiers in pursuit of its policy of collaborationism.⁴ I also took a graduate course at Columbia from a visiting professor from Princeton University, the

¹ Algernon D. Black, *The Young Citizens: The Story of the Encampment for Citizenship* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1962).

² William Chafe, *Never Stop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

³ After his retirement I co-edited with another of his former students a book in his honor with chapters by former students, colleagues, publishers, and admirers. William R. Keylor and Dora B. Weiner, eds. *From Parnassus: Essays in Honor of Jacques Barzun* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976.)

⁴ Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

diplomatic historian Arno J. Mayer. The enrollment in the class was huge, so I never got to know him personally. But he decisively influenced me in the direction of diplomatic/international history, which resulted in two future books.⁵

While a graduate student in history in the year 1968, an unfolding drama across the Pacific Ocean left an indelible imprint on my political consciousness. That was the war in Vietnam. I was passionately opposed to that U.S. military engagement, perhaps reflecting feelings of guilt about my own student deferment while others of my age were fighting and dying in that far-off conflict which seemed to have no legitimate purpose. Those sentiments were bolstered when I attended a course in the second semester of 1967-68 by the esteemed journalist David Schoenbrun, who had served as the CBS bureau chief in Paris from 1947 to 1964. In that course he recounted the history of the Vietnam war, both the Franco-Vietnamese war of 1946-1954 and the ongoing American war in Vietnam.

But he was not able to complete his lecture series because of what happened in April 1968: I joined my fellow students—graduate and undergraduate—in occupying buildings on the campus to protest against (among other things) the university's involvement with the Pentagon through a research group called the Institute for Defense Analyses. After officers of the New York Police Department cleared the students out of the occupied buildings, I worked on the presidential campaigns of the anti-war candidate for the Democratic Party, Senator Eugene McCarthy of Wisconsin. I met my future wife and best friend, Rheta Grenoble Keylor, just after the 'bust' (as the police action was then called). We were married in December 1968 and recently celebrated our fifty-first wedding anniversary.

After passing my doctoral oral examination I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to begin primary-source research in France. When we departed New York City for Paris I planned to write a study of a French intellectual and politician named Maurice Barrès. While sitting with my wife in a Latin Quarter restaurant I overheard an American customer at a nearby table mentioning that he had just completed a book on that individual. When I came over to his table he informed me that another American scholar named Robert Soucy had also just completed a book on Barrès. Two books about to be published about this rather peripheral character!

I visited Bob Soucy in his Parisian apartment and expressed my anguish at having to abandon the project on which I had done so much preliminary research in New York City. He suggested an alternative: A study of the monarchist journalist/historian Jacques Bainville. I jumped at the opportunity and began my research in the *Bibliothèque nationale de Paris*. I soon discovered that the French historical profession was itself worthy of a separate study. This experience resulted in my first two books.⁶

When I secured my first teaching job in the history department of Boston University in the autumn of 1972, I was hired to teach European intellectual/cultural history, with an emphasis on France. The department did not have a diplomatic/international historian, so there was no objection to my taking on this new assignment. In the course of the 1970s I gradually became aware of the hostility within the historical profession at large toward my new subfield, especially from social historians. They denounced the alleged elitism of diplomatic/international history as follows: Ignoring, or at least discounting the importance of, the broader social, cultural, and economic processes at work in a particular country, this

⁵Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World and Beyond: An International History Since 1900*, 6th rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Keylor, *A World of Nations: The International Order Since 1945*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶Keylor, *Academy and Community: The Foundation of the French Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). Keylor, *Jacques Bainville and the Renaissance of Royalist History in Twentieth-Century France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

sub-set of the historical profession focused on the small number of people responsible for the formulation and execution of the foreign policies of that state.⁷

In the next several decades, during long sojourns in Paris, I developed close friendships with a number of French historians who share my interest in diplomatic/international history: André Kaspi, Pierre Mélandri, Georges-Henri Soutou, and Maurice Vaïsse, among others. Most of them were students of the late dean of French diplomatic historians, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and participated in the publication of the multi-volume *Documents diplomatiques français*, which is a counterpart of the United States' *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes. As a visiting professor at Sciences-Po (*Institut d'études politique de Paris*), I interacted with French and foreign students who were studying at that august institution.

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At Boston University I eventually developed a two-semester lecture course on the history of international relations since 1900. When I retired in 2018 after teaching at that institution for 46 years, an enterprising researcher discovered that more than 16,000 undergraduate students had taken this course. I still hear from some of them, decades after they had enrolled in my lecture class.

Along the way I departed even further from my original field of European intellectual/cultural history. First, I obtained a joint appointment with the International Relations Department of Boston University, which several years ago became to Frederick Pardee School for Global Studies. It was a genuinely interdisciplinary organization, with political scientists, political economists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, as well as retired government officials and military officers. Second, I became a proud member of the Board of Editors of the distinguished on-line journal that you are reading. The term "Board of Editors" is a bit misleading, since we do not make decisions about which book, chapter, or article should be reviewed. We are occasionally called upon to resolve controversies submitted to us by the real editors, led by the incomparable Diane Labrosse.

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⁷ I address the hostility of social historians to my chosen sub-discipline of history in a commissioned essay in H-Diplo several years ago: William R. Keylor, "The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History." H-Diplo, April 10, 2015. <http://tiny.cc/E126>.