

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Performances & Keynotes

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

[Untitled talk about Lou and surviving the Holocaust]

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_performances

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "[Untitled talk about Lou and surviving the Holocaust]" (2023). *Performances & Keynotes*. 11.

https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_performances/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performances & Keynotes by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lfthompson@pittstate.edu.

Some years ago, Ken and I were having brunch -- blintzes of course -- with Lou, Jane, Jarek and Maura, and the thought I had been percolating for years -- that someone should write a book of Lou's story of the Holocaust, Jarek's story of the Polish Underground, and their remarkable friendship -- slipped out my lips. I asked them if I could write this story despite my repeated thoughts over the years that I shouldn't offer such a thing because I was way too busy with work, writing and living in a household of teenagers. It was the best slip I ever made.

Although Lou and I disagreed about all things spiritual (or even the existence of spiritual), for me, receiving Lou's story was one of the two greatest spiritual gifts of my life, the other being the wave of love and forgiveness I experienced at my father's death. Lou's story is obviously about survival, making a life in a new world after the world he came from was destroyed and eliminated. Yet it's also a story about how to live, particularly in light of the worst darkness humankind has experienced, that of the most systematic murder of millions.

In telling me his story, Lou didn't just invite me in for the ride; he made sure my seat was well-padded with laughter to make the passing through all the places we would visit bearable for me. The worst the atrocity, the harder we laughed. One time I ran into Rick in the produce section of the Merc, and he told me, "My mom says you and Dad are laughing your asses off." It was true, in some part because of the jokes Lou told me, like this one:

It turns out Hitler survived WWII and was in hiding in Argentina when some SS men find him and beg, "Please, Furor, can't we just do it all again? Please?" Hitler thinks it over for a moment, sighs, and then says, "Well, alright, but this time, no more Mr. nice guy."

Lou brought so much humor to his story that one of the many publishers that rejected the book - - Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each Other -- said that Lou was too happy and obviously not coming to terms of what he had been through. This limited view of a Holocaust survivor is one of the many mythologies Lou sought to break through, and his story as well as his life is a testament to living outside narrow views, closed-mindedness and apathetic or frightened avoidance of what's most wrong with the world.

But beyond the jokes, Lou constantly made me laugh, both of often laughing so much I would start to cry too. Lou had one of the greatest laughs of all time, and he also brought that laughter to his story not just to show how ludicrous the Nazis were (which, in addition to being evil to and beyond the bone, they were), but how life goes on despite and because of almost all his beloved -- mother, father, cousins, aunts, uncles, friends -- killed.

Lou's story didn't just teach me about survival and resiliency, but about what it means to live with our eyes and hearts wide open. His discernment of what he experienced was profound and precise, but he also saw what could be. The goodness he made out of his life was more expansive and higher than the depth and complexities of the evil he experienced.

When Lou's cancer started metastasizing, and it seemed likely he didn't have years left but only months, I decided to write him a poem. Having written a poem for Maura's (may she rest in peace) memorial service, I knew I would want to read Lou a poem too, but why not write it while he was still here so he could have that too? Strangely enough, as some of you know, Lou died on the one year anniversary of Maura's death. While I would much rather have had to dig this poem out years from now for Lou's service, I'm sad to say now is the time, yet for me, Lou is still here -- right in my heart.

For Lou, While He's Still Here

"I won't last long," Lou says, his voice bright on the phone. I pace the deck on a shining autumn morning, Lou stands in his kitchen or walks to his couch, the books to re-read marking his place. We talk of his health, his grandkids, my kids, and of course, Nazis. "This one just cracks me up," he says, his voice rising to tell me what he found in the paper. Meanwhile, more doctor's appointments, his granddaughters' college papers, a magazine article in Polish, another book on what really happened. Never paranoia in Lou's case, but the simple clarity of facing death too many times. He rifles through his memory, lands on a story he wants to tell, and starts talking.

Almost 70 years ago, he fell asleep instantly each night in the camps, his body trained on survival. He stood at attention when he had to, shoveled or peeled or carried for hours, and walked until he could no longer go on, ready to die. Having lived, he made a life from tenderness and beyond the ruins of evil. Now he laughs about how, after the darkest pain last night, he ended up, this morning, drinking 7-up, amazed at how delicious it was. Meanwhile, the cancer advances, the world continues to fall apart and come together, brilliant photos of sea creatures come across the internet, and his son shows up with home-made cookies.

If anyone can show us what it is to live, it's Lou, who keeps close the folders of news clippings, a photo of family at a costume party before the war, receipts and visas, letters delivered years later. The family long gone, and the family now here: all he lives for, their entwined voices alive with laughter, urgency and calm, stories and realizations, song and surprise because of him, because of what he shows us about the love that endures.