

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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LENART, DOCTOROW & BIKEI

Lenart, Doctorow & Bikel: sounds like a law firm, doesn't it? But of course, it is not. Far from it. **Lenart** (as in Lou), **Doctorow** (as in E.L.) and **Bikel** (as in Theo) were three towering giants of human accomplishment who passed away within 24 hours of one another this past week. Their fields of endeavor were as disparate as their places of death: Lenart in, Israel, Doctorow in New York City, and Bikel in Los Angeles. They all lived long and exceptionally active lives: they were, respectively, 94, 84 and 91. The three entertained and enlightened, were creative and courageous, and above all, made the world a better place. Indeed, it has been a week of loss.



Lenart, Doctorow & Bikel.

Lou Lenart (Layos Lenovitz) was born in a small Hungarian village near the Czech border on April 21, 1924. Lenart grew up in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., where his family immigrated when he was 9. During his youth, he and his siblings (which included his sister Lillian, who would one day found the Coach Leatherworks Company) suffered the taunts and fists of their anti-Semitic school mates. Bulking himself up via a Charles Atlas course, Lou joined the United States Marines at age 17, and nearly lost his life in a mid-air training collision. He went on to serve at the Battle of Okinawa and in bombing raids over Japan.

At war's end, he attended a lecture on Zionism. Spurred by this -- and the death of 14 family members in the Holocaust -- Lenart went to Palestine, where he

began smuggling airplanes into the tiny Jewish State, thereby becoming a Founding Father of the its nascent air force. As one of the first four pilots in Israel's air force, Lenart led an attack on more than 10,000 Egyptian troops who had advanced to a bridge within 16 miles of Israel's largest city. For his heroic actions, he would become known as the "man who saved Tel Aviv."



Lenart would go on to airlift thousands of Jewish refugees from Iraq to Israel, serve as one of the first pilots for *El Al*, [produce a major motion picture](#) and even serve a stint as general manager of the NBA's San Diego (now Los Angeles) Clippers. Just last year, at age 90, Lenart was featured in Nancy Spielberg's documentary *Above and Beyond*, which told the story the Jewish pilots from the U.S. who established Israel's air defenses. Playwright David Mamet likened Lou Lenart and his colleagues to the giants of American history: *"Meeting with guys like Lou Lenart and Al Schwimmer (one of Lenart's fellow pilots) it's like sitting down with Abraham Lincoln or George Washington. When the pioneers did what they did, it was basically impossible."*

Certainly no one who beat up young Lou Lenart in 1930s Wilkes Barre could ever have predicted where his life would take him or how much he would accomplish.

E.L. (Edgar Lawrence) Doctorow, on the other hand, seems to have been destined for a career as a writer from the day of his birth - January 6, 1931. For at birth, his parents, David and Rose Doctorow, named him "Edgar," after Edgar



Allan Poe, a favorite of his father. Growing up in the Bronx, E.L. attended the Bronx High School of Science. In a famous story about his days as a student at that prestigious school, *New York Times* obituarist Bruce Weber wrote that Doctorow " . . . fulfilled an assignment in a journalism class at the Bronx High School of Science by writing a

profile of Carl, the stage doorman at Carnegie Hall, filling it with such persuasive and poignant details that his teacher wanted to run it in the school newspaper. When it was time for a photographer to take the man's picture, however, Edgar had to confess that there was no Carl the doorman; Carl was an invention."

Doctorow attended Ohio's Kenyan College, where he studied with poet and critic [John Crowe Ransom](#). Upon receiving his B.A., Doctorow spent a year in the

graduate program in drama at Columbia. Following a brief stint in the Army, Doctorow became a reader for Columbia Motion Pictures, where, as he would later note, he read "hundreds upon hundreds of bad western novels, looking for a couple that might be turned into good movies." Out of that experience came his first novel, 1960's "Welcome to Hard Times."

Doctorow spent many years as editor-in-chief of the Dial Press, where he worked with such imminent authors as Norman Mailer and James Baldwin. In 1960, following publication of a couple of well-received though sparsely-sold novels, Doctorow became a literary force to be reckoned with his novel *The Book of Daniel*, which would be made into a major motion picture starring Timothy Hutton. *Daniel*, a reimagining of the trial and execution of [Ethel and Julius Rosenberg](#) (here named Paul and Rochelle Issacson) set the stage for the kind of novels Doctorow would write throughout the rest of his career: works which, again quoting the *Times*' Weber, " . . . situated fictional characters in recognizable historical contexts, among identifiable historical figures and often within unconventional narrative forms."

Through his best-known novels -- *Ragtime* (1975), *Loon Lake* (1980), *World's Fair* (1985), *Billy Bathgate* (1989) and *The March* (2006) -- Doctorow created a masterful world in which fictional characters freely -- and believably -- interact with historical personages. Thus, in *Ragtime*, as but one example, Henry Ford, Sigmund Freud, Harry Houdini and Emma Goldman (among others) are woven into a plot peopled by a host of purely fictional characters. Many of Doctorow's novels were turned into motion pictures, and one -- again, *Ragtime* -- became a musical, running for two years on Broadway and capturing 4 Emmy awards.

Throughout his distinguished career -- which included teaching stints at Sarah Lawrence, Yale, Princeton and the University of California, Irvine -- won three National Book Critics Circle Awards, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. Doctorow was a thoroughly American writer who, better than just about anyone in our literary history, was able to make the country's history -- warts and all -- spring to life with a facility that is the mark of genius.

Theo Bikel was a genius -- literally. He was a member of Mensa, the high-I.Q. group. He was also a man of so many talents and appetites who will long be remembered for different things by different people. For some, he will first, last and always be Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. For others, he will always be



Captain Georg von Trapp in the original Broadway production of *The Sound of Music*. For many, he will be a movie and television actor who appeared in such classics as *The African Queen*, *The Defiant Ones*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Russians Are Coming*, *The Russians Are Coming* and *Columbo*. And again, for others, he will be best remembered as a supremely gifted folksinger who recorded 38 albums, singing in at least 21 languages, co-founded (along with Pete Seeger) the Newport Folk Festival, and was largely responsible for Bob Dylan's rise to fame and fortune.

Named after Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, Theodore Meir Bikel was born in Austria on May 2, 1924. In 1938, the Bikels were fortunate enough to wrangle British passports and flee Austria to Mandatory Palestine, where young Theo lived on a kibbutz and began performing with the legendary *Habimah Theatre* as early as 1943. Two years later, Bikel went to London, where he attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. In 1948, Michael Redgrave recommended Bikel to his friend Laurence Olivier for a part in the original London production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* starring Vivien Lee. From there, Bikel went into motion pictures, his first role being the First Officer aboard the *Königin Luise* in Sam Spiegel's *African Queen* (1951). Bikel was also a political activist, serving nine years (1973-1982) as president of Actors' Equity and being a delegate for Eugene McCarthy at the contentious 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In 1986, he was arrested outside the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., while protesting the plight of Soviet Jews. Yes indeed, this was a man who lived many, many lives -- and succeeded in them all.

(The other day, my old childhood chum Alan Wald -- who is frequently mentioned in these pages for alerting me to possible topics -- reminded me that on the day I received my Doctorate in Divinity from the Hebrew Union College, Theodore Bikel was there, receiving an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters. For some reason, until Alan reminded me of the occasion, I had forgotten that Mr. Bikel had been there. Thinking back, I now recall receiving a crushing bear hug from the man . . . as we admired each other's white beards.)

Lenart, Doctorow & Bikel. Not a law firm, to be certain.

Three extraordinarily accomplished human beings who made a big, big difference in this world of ours.

All shall be sorely missed . . .

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