

# On Being the Son of Dr. Henry Morgentaler



Photo courtesy of author.

## **Abraham Morgentaler, MD**

**M**y father, Dr. Henry Morgentaler, was many things to many people. How he thought of himself, though, was as a humanist. He believed fervently in the human dignity of each individual, and he valued reason and logical thinking as if it were his faith. When Christopher DiCarlo invited me to write an article about my father for *Humanist Perspectives*, in particular to address what it was like to grow up in a humanist home, I thought long and hard about the best way to do this. What follows is an adaptation of a eulogy I gave at my father's funeral two years ago. In the end, nothing beats a personal story.

A professional colleague of mine, an older, wise man from New York City, sent me a note after he saw the obituary regarding my father in the *New York Times*. After expressing his condolences and remarking on the amazing ac-

complishments of my father, he then wrote: "It couldn't have been easy being his son."

That struck me. It was wonderfully empathic, and it made me think of whether or not it had been easy being Henry's son. No, there wasn't much that was "easy" about Henry, but easy isn't really the right word. For those who knew Henry, there was nothing ordinary about him, or being around him. Life was altered by knowing him, and this certainly was true by being part of his family.

I was 14 years old when I first learned the word "abortion." I had come home from a school field trip and my father asked me to sit down in the living room with him. This was something new. He told me he had been arrested while I was gone, and had spent a night in jail. He told me it was for performing an abortion, and he explained what that was. The arrest sounded bad,

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but on the face of it, it didn't seem so alarming. After all, here he was in our own home, and he seemed fine. I had no way of knowing this was the beginning of a change in all of our lives. For me as a teenager, the immediate impact of the news stories was that some friends were no longer allowed to play with me.

I was 17 and had just finished high school when Henry's first trial took place in Montreal. It was front page news. Everywhere we went, then, and for the rest of our lives, people would come up in the street, in restaurants, and want to shake his hand, or stare. That was the end of "public anonymity," if there is such a thing. He won that first trial, but lost on appeal and

eventually was sentenced to prison. By then I was a freshman at Harvard College. It was bad enough to deliver my father to prison, where he would stay for 10 months, but the money also stopped. I scrambled to be able to continue my studies, with scholarships, loans, and jobs.

I had it relatively easy. My younger brother Benny, as an adolescent, was confronted with fire bombings of our father's place of work, and installation of bullet-proof glass in his home, the result of abortion providers being shot in their homes by snipers. Being the child of Henry Morgentaler had risks associated with it.

But that's not to say it was all bad, because to be Henry Morgentaler's child was also to be the child of a rock star. Henry's life – and to a lesser degree, ours – was a life like none other. Henry grew up in Łódź, Poland in a strongly anti-Semitic world where, as a child, it was necessary to figure out how to avoid the Polish kids on the way home from school, since they would beat him up because he was Jewish. If caught and you denied you were Jewish, they would pull down your pants to see if you were circumcised. When he was 16, the Nazis invaded

Poland, and immediately arrested his father, a union leader, and shot him soon thereafter.

Henry and his family were moved to a ghetto in what was the worst section of town, and lived behind barbed wire for 4 years, as the elderly, the infirm, and children died or were forcibly removed from their families to be slaughtered. When the ghetto was finally being liquidated, Henry and his family, together with the family of my mother, the acclaimed author, Chava Rosenfarb, hid behind a fake wall until they were eventually discovered by the Nazis. From there, he went through the selection at Auschwitz, where he lost his mother, and spent the rest of the war working in slave camps. Somehow

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he survived, and made his way to a new country – Canada – and created a new life. Out of that misery and grief, Henry created a world full of family and friends and love. Who had a life like that?

For his family, our lives were filled with laughter, and song, and dance, and pure silliness. Henry loved to laugh. Once, on vacation with Henry, his wife, Arlene, his sons, and his grandchildren, I told a good joke at the dinner table. Everyone laughed hard, including Henry. About 5 minutes later, while we were all talking about something else, he starts laughing hard again.

"What are you laughing about?" I asked.

"I just got the joke!" he said.

"Okay, but then what were you laughing at when I first told the joke?"

"I don't know," he replied. "It seemed funny at the time."

I would now like to share three stories about my father which reflect well on him as a Humanist. The first story takes place when I was about 6 years old, maybe 7, and what I cared about most at that time was the Montreal

Canadiens hockey team. During the day, I had an argument with three other boys as to who was the most valuable hockey player on the team. I said John Beliveau, and they said Henri Richard. The argument ended when one kid said to me, "All of us agree it's Henri Richard. You're the only one that believes something else. That means you're wrong." That night, when my father put me to bed, I told him what had happened. His response has stuck with

me forever, and could easily be a byline for his life. He said, "It's possible to be the only person in the world who believes something, and to be right."

In the second story, a Canadian film crew doing a documentary on Henry traveled with him to his hometown of Łódź, Poland, and very much wanted to film him at Auschwitz. My father invited me to join him. After visiting his original home and the place in the ghetto where the families hid from the Nazis, it was time to decide whether we would travel to Auschwitz, a few hours away by car. My father didn't want to go. He had been troubled by night-terrors for many years following the war, with dreams of storm troopers in tall boots kicking down doors. He was afraid of what a visit to Auschwitz might stir up for him. On the evening before we needed to decide, we met at the home of a Łódź physician who was one of the few Jewish survivors of the Warsaw Uprising. My father asked him if he should go after explaining his concerns. "Don't be so delicate," replied our host. "Go."

We went to Auschwitz. There was the famous sign over the gate, *Arbeit macht frei* (Work shall make you free). There was a pebble path beneath it. Henry picked up a small rock and threw it at the sign as hard as he could, grunting loudly. He then picked up another rock and

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threw it again as hard as he could. And again. And again. My father was then well into his 70s, and was no longer a young man. We stayed a long time while Henry threw rocks, grunting, almost screaming as he did so.

My final story takes place in Henry's country place in the Laurentian Mountains in southern Quebec by a lake. It was summertime, and I was visiting with my girlfriend, who later became my wife. We had escaped

the house to find some private time, and we cozied up in a hammock we found, tied between two trees. My father came along, and said "Oh, do you want me to rock the two of you?" How could we say no?

There I was in the shade of the trees, my girlfriend snuggled into me on a comfy hammock, being rocked gently by my father as he sang Yiddish lullabies to us in his resonant voice. The earth stopped turning for the sheer beauty of the moment.

For me, the big mystery about my father is this: how does someone who has lived his life of pain, grief, and suffering, who has witnessed first-hand what I can only call "evil," find the ability to create a new life of joy and love? How does someone who has lived through his experiences declare to anybody who wishes to listen, as Henry often did, that people are basically good?

Was it easy being the son of Henry Morgentaler? I'll tell you what it was. It was thrilling. •

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