MARCHING WITH DR. KING

Cyril Robinson

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Ralph Helstein and the United Packinghouse Workers of America

Cyril Robinson

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This book is dedicated to Les Orear, worker, union organizer,
journalist, photographer, and founder and president
of the Illinois Labor History Society.

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Preface

Why a biography of Ralph Helstein, a person very few readers have ever heard of, and why have I chosen to write it?

As I thought more about and learned more about Helstein, it became clear to me that I held a certain kinship to Helstein—his religion, his profession, his convictions, his culture, and his dedication to social justice paralleled mine.

Helstein, then the union's general counsel, was elected president of the United Packinghouse Workers Union of America (UPWA) in 1946 as the compromise candidate of the left and right. Although electing an attorney as president seemed strange because the UPWA had insisted that the union must be led by a packinghouse worker, Helstein had shown his leadership ability and was not a partisan of any political wing. As it turned out, the choice was fortuitous because Helstein was able to steer the union through a disastrous 1948 strike; begin an antidiscrimination program that strengthened the union; and bring to the workers all kinds of benefits in wage hikes, working conditions, and health and vacation benefits.

That he held strong and consistent views on freedom of speech allowed the union to avoid the political rifts current in other unions during the McCarthy red-baiting period. Helstein also foresaw the problems brought on by changes in the industry because of automation, elimination of jobs, and movement of packing operations from the Midwest to the Southwest. When these plants began to shut down, most workers received severance pay and job protection found nowhere else in industry.

Helstein led his union during particularly turbulent times. The post–World War II environment was a time of left–right splits throughout the country, and the UPWA was no exception. This was a time when the CIO was going through anti-red purges. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) accused the UPWA of being Communist dominated—and with

some reason because a high percentage of its officers either were in the recent past or were now Communist Party members. Yet to my knowledge, no one ever accused Helstein himself of being a Communist Party member or of being a Communist—not that it would have phased him.

Although Helstein was not religious in the traditional sense, his brand of Judaism, as a social activist and a believer in prophetic Judaism and social justice, played an important role in his thinking and planning. His presidency of the UPWA follows a long line of Jewish labor leaders such as Samuel Gompers, David Dubinsky, and Sidney Hillman, all of whom had a view of their trade union leadership broader and were more socially active than most of the leaders of their time.

Finally, in 1968, before his retirement, he engineered a long-sought merger with the Amalgamated Meatcutters. No doubt he foresaw the problems such a move would make both for the UPWA and for him personally. His progressive policies and opinions were unwelcome in his post with the Amalgamated, where he was relegated to a non-policy administrative function. He soon retired, and physical problems that had dogged him for many years made his last years unfulfilling. He died in 1985 of a heart attack. At his funeral, family, friends, associates, and nationally known figures spoke glowingly of his life and of the irreplaceable loss of such a moral and intellectual giant.

In writing a biography, a writer takes on a heavy responsibility—what to disclose and what not to disclose, a tendency to either respect too much or detest too much his subject, concern about wounding with disclosures his relatives or friends who saw a totally different man from the one the writer feels an obligation to his readers to reveal. In this work, I never faced those decisions. Like any human being, Helstein arguably made some mistakes and made some bitter decisions affecting his friends that he thought necessary to save the union. He had some personal views such as believing that union officials should have very modest salaries, meaning that all other officials in the union received substantially lower salaries than officials in other unions. This caused some resentment, but to my knowledge, no one ever complained to him about it.

In sum, readers will find no exposés here. What they will find is a man and the union he led like no other on this earth. His story and this union's story deserves to be told. That's what I have tried to do.

I felt a closeness to Helstein because as lawyer, I could understand his belief that the law should be used as a tool to correct some of the abuses and inequalities found in our society. As he did, I believed in labor unions

as a means for workers to collectively combine to fight for a better life for themselves and their families. As a secular Jew, I was interested in finding just what importance Judaism had for Helstein in carrying out those social objectives.

Two historians, Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz, were in the process of completing their dissertations and turning them into books at the time I started my study. In the course of their project, they had interviewed most of the actors in the UPWA drama.[1] Another writer, interested in Jewish union leaders, had interviewed Helstein about how his Jewish background influenced his policies.[2]

I want to thank a number of people whose participation made this book possible. First and foremost is Les Orear. Orear was an organizer for the union, then editor of the *Packinghouse Worker*, the UPWA's official publication, and thereafter founder of the Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS), an organization dedicated to preserving the history of unionism and educating the public and present union members about that history. It was the ILHS that provided a grant that permitted me to conduct interviews for this project, and it was Orear that over the years provided corrections and filled in gaps in my knowledge as the work progressed. In the text, the reader will find in the prose of Orear the grit of this union's soul. In addition, Les' daughter, Lynn, was extremely helpful in searching through ILHS files for documents and photos.

I wish also to thank Nina and her sister Toni; Helstein's daughters; and Helstein's wife, Rachel for the information on Ralph's childhood and his philosophy. A separate thanks is due Nina, who, over dinners in restaurants, gave me numerous interviews that I recorded among the sounds of dishes being rearranged and meal orders taken. She also generously read and corrected drafts of the book.

Brad Lyttle, a friend in Chicago, provided a home for me in my many trips to Chicago. Dissertations and subsequent books and articles by Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz were indispensable in providing an understanding of the development of union policies, and the interviews of union officials, including several of Helstein were especially helpful and often cited. I would also like to thank Professor Robbie Lieberman of the history department of Southern Illinois University, who made valuable editorial suggestions and could always be counted on to be available with ideas that moved the manuscript toward publication. Dan Sharon, retired reference librarian at Spertus Institute, Asher library, Chicago, read and corrected faults in the manuscript and over the years provided continual research counsel.

The library at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where much of Helstein's and the UPWA's records reside, helpfully supplied copies of the Halpern–Horowitz tape recordings and knowledgeably provided access and guidance in my trips to Madison to find, examine, and copy records. I especially want to thank Harry Miller, reference archivist, Wisconsin Historical Society, for his extensive help in searching and finding what I needed.

Morris Library personnel at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale made my research easier by access to interlibrary loans and to material, books, and newspapers from their archives. Almost all the computer assistance came from my friend, Don Ugent, who was has a wealth of expertise in this area.

This book never would have seen the light of day without the support of Michael Millman of Praeger Press.

Introduction

Ralph Helstein[1] was first general counsel and then from 1946 to November 1972, when he retired, president of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA).[2] How this Jewish lawyer, raised as an Orthodox Jew, became and maintained his leadership of a predominantly black worker organization, whose predominant business was slaughtering and marketing pig products, is a fascinating story.

I met Helstein only one time, in 1952, as a recently hired lawyer with Cotton, Fruchtman[3] and Watt, the law firm that represented the union. Such a personal diversion in a biography would be inappropriate except that it shows an important side of Helstein, a characteristic he used in his management of the UPWA.

Soon after I started at the law firm, I was notified that Helstein wanted to see me. I met him at the union's office in downtown Chicago, located in the Transportation Building at the corner of Dearborn and Harrison Streets.[4]

Helstein was a balding man of small stature, friendly and welcoming, with a firm, direct delivery.[5] If I was to work with and represent workers, he explained, I had to understand their work experience. There was only one way to do this, and that was by sharing that experience. While I looked on, he called the head officer of a small (about 250 employees) packinghouse, William Davies Packing Co., situated in the Chicago Stockyards area. He told me that he wanted me to work for the company so I might gain some experience in packing. He asked that I be moved around from job to job to vary my experience.

That he, the head of the union with which the company was then negotiating a contract, could ask his adversary to allow a young lawyer to enter its employ as a worker, at the time, struck me as astounding. It showed both the amount of trust Helstein garnered even from his adversaries and his concern that these workers be represented by someone who

understood and empathized with their problems, not only intellectually but experientially as well. In addition, as we will see, he sought to make up in me for the lack he always felt in himself—never having shared that work experience with the workers he led.

Jews as Labor Leaders

Helstein was a Jew and ended up as leader of a labor union. Was this trajectory as a Jewish leader of a trade union unique? Or is there a history of Jewish leaders of labor unions? And if so, what leads Jews to join and become active in labor unions? And to what extent, if any, did Helstein's Jewishness affect his leadership of the union?

Like many Jews, Helstein was a secular Jew, but his Jewishness definitely influenced, if it did not determine, how he lived his life. Many times he characterized his faith as "prophetic Judaism." Helstein had definite views as to social activism, what some people would call radical. Prophetic Judaism was not unique to Helstein but was part of Jewish culture, character, and history.

Joe Rapoport,[6] a radical Jewish unionist and supporter of many radical causes, gives a traditional base for his own views. We Jews are reminded of it every year at Passover with the words "evodim boyinu be-mitsrayim, we were slaves in the land of Egypt." We have a history as antislavery fighters in the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. In this, we acted on the general principle of supporting minority workers in their fight for economic rights—for a living wage, for the right to a job, for protective legislation and union recognition.[7]

Gerald Sorin, who interviewed 170 Jewish radicals, concluded that his interviews strongly suggest that the Jewish socialists were a prophetic minority,[8] responding to biblical norms of social justice interpreted in modern context. They were men and women who had been deeply immersed in the moral commandments of the Torah and Talmud, in messianic belief systems, traditions of *tsedaka* (not mere charity but righteousness and justice toward others), mutual aid, and communal responsibility.[9] Sorin concludes:

> Jewish socialists contributed significantly to keeping the concepts of human interdependence and government responsibility for social welfare in the political dialogue. And they shared responsibility for several decades of reform legislation. These men and women, in addition, created a wide-ranging web of fraternal organizations which transmitted the values of the Left to succeeding generations.

And they were a prophetic minority, too—not because they accurately predicted the future but because they worked at educating and mobilizing the best in people and at sustaining loyalty to the highest ideals of social justice. They worked, like Isaiah and Amos and Micah and Hosea, with whom they were so familiar, at hastening the coming of a just, peaceful, and beautiful world.[10]

This radicalism was more than a political persuasion. According to Rapoport, political life was part of a working-class way of life that in turn led to and was intertwined with Jewish political life.

We had schools, lecture series, theatrical groups, literary groups, folk choruses, and mandolin orchestras. There were special summer camps where we could take a vacation and spend time together. There were weekend excursions for camping and hiking. There was the visiting with friends in the evenings. All of these things were a binder for trade union and political struggles. It caught my imagination and encouraged my participation in the movement.[11]

Workers in the first decade of the twentieth century were militant, but Jewish workers were the most militant of any immigrant group. Jewish trade unions grew the fastest. More Jews were Socialists, and on the East Coast, where most Jews congregated, they were able to elect a congressman and many mayors and state legislators.[12] Although most non-Jewish immigrants to the United States were of peasant origin, Jewish immigrants were largely town dwellers, skilled artisans, or laborers.[13]

Statistically, Jews were the largest ethnic faction of the American Communist Party. Jews were "concentrated in the clothing industries [so] that Jewish Communists could and did play an important role in the labor movement without modifying their ethnic identification." Many of the major leaders of the party were Jews.[14] One difference between Jews and most other ethnic groups was that as second-generation Jews moved into professions—teachers, social workers, lawyers, librarians—they retained their liberal or radical ideas.[15] In 1935, a large Jewish contingent of Communists took over leadership of the American Federation of Teachers in New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia.[16]

Jewish social workers were active in founding a whole series of social service agencies and accompanying trade unions: the State, County, and Municipal Workers of America; the United Federal Workers; the United Public Workers; the New York Association of Federation Workers; workers of the Jewish Federation; the Union of Office and Professional Workers of America (1937); and the United Service for New Americans.[17]

The idea behind the constant and historic activity of Jews in various social movements can be succinctly stated that Jews understood that "to survive, the world must change, and that to the extent we can, we must change the world. . . ."[18]

Although there was no precedent for a Jew to be a head of a packinghouse union, Jews had been important leaders in unions since the end of the nineteenth century, when East European Jews arrived in large numbers.[19]

Since then, Jews have been an important component of the trade union movement. The relationship of Jewish labor leaders to their religion, however, has been conflicted and complex.

Ethically and socially conscious, ever willing to protest injustice, these millions of new Jewish Americans joined their non-Jewish counterparts in creating labor unions that transformed work in the United States. Some Jews became socialists or even Communists, but most were just unionists. They followed the lead of Samuel Gompers, a Jewish American immigrant from England who founded the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886. His program of cooperative negotiation with employers became the basis of modern collective bargaining. More militant Jewish labor leaders also made an impact, and "strikes . . . were a valuable instrument of persuasion."[20]

Jewish Communists were influential in bringing Communist Party members out into the open from their prior underground status in which, as a strategy, they hid from government oppression. The Jewish Communists were, by far, more assimilated in American life than the other foreign groups; they had a more realistic appreciation of the decisive significance of a party leadership that would appear to be a genuine American product. They wanted to be part of a larger American movement, not merely the leaders of a sect of foreign-born Communists.[21]

Jews were disproportionally involved in the civil rights movement. Jews were among the earliest supporters and board members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Jewish leaders helped support the Urban League, the Jewish-dominated International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Jews took the lead in organizing "our black brothers" for union membership. Kenneth Clark's segregation study had been commissioned by the American Jewish Committee; that organization, as well as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress, submitted amicus curiae briefs in support of cases arguing for desegregation. The Julius Rosenthal Fund provided $20 million for the establishment of rural southern schools.

Young northern Jews enlisted in the civil rights struggle and migrated South; "as many as 90 percent of the civil rights lawyers in Mississippi were Jewish and Jews were at least 30 percent of the white volunteers who rode freedom buses in the South, registered blacks, and picketed segregated establishments. . . ."[22]

Helstein was a Jew who ended up as the leader of a labor union. During his career as president of the UPWA, he championed liberal causes; steered his union to lead in civil rights and civil liberties, including the rights of minorities and women; and as we will see, was one of the earliest union leaders to support Martin Luther King, Jr., both financially and organizationally.

Helstein's labor leadership cannot be considered an anomaly. Helstein was preceded by three Jewish labor leaders.[23]

Samuel Gompers, born in a London slum in 1850,[24] led the AFL for 35 years from its founding in 1886.[25] The next Jew who became an important labor leader was David Dubinsky. Born in Lodz, Poland in 1891, he was elected president of the ILGWU in 1932.[26]

Sidney Hillman, another Jewish labor leader, was born in 1887 in a small Lithuanian village in the Russian Pale. In 1907, Hillman founded a union of the "Jewish needle trades, with its heart in the world of Jewish socialism and labor radicalism."[27]

Similar to other Jewish-dominated unions, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers had ambitious educational plans. Members were to be schooled in the English language and in the parliamentary procedures of trade unions. Jewish trade unions embodied the Jewish principles of "haskalah and tachlis; its pedagological amalgamation of a secularized messianism" bringing together "rebelliousness and assimilation."[28]

Hillman's advocacy of fringe benefits in addition to wages came to be known as the "New Unionism." During the Roosevelt administration, Hillman was appointed first to the National Labor Advisory Board and then the labor member of the National Industrial Recovery Board. He was instrumental in organizing the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936. To elect Democratic congressional candidates in 1943, the CIO, under Philip Murray, created a political action committee and named Hillman as its chair.[29]

Were Jewish-Dominated Unions Different from Other Unions?[30]

Jewish unions were different from those prevailing in the United States during the early years of the century. In tone and quality, they resembled

the unions established by European Social Democrats and anticipated the social unionism later introduced by the CIO. Although most American unions focused on immediate bread-and-butter issues and were likely to be hostile to heterodox ideas, Jewish unions reached out toward a wide range of interests, from social insurance plans to cooperative housing, educational programs to Yiddishist cultural activity. Especially in the earlier years of their insurgency, the Jewish unions were not merely bargaining agencies; they were also centers of social-cultural life, serving some of the same functions as the *landsmanshaftn*,[31] although with a much more enlightened outlook.

Chapter 1

Early Years

Helstein described himself as having "a middle-class background." His father came to this country from Eastern Germany when he was about 10 years old. At 15 or 16 years of age, his mother joined a sister living in Superior, Wisconsin. His mother's father had been a captain of a grain barge that went up and down the Nieman River. One of his father's early memories was of the pogroms in Kovno in Lithuania.[1]

Helstein was born in Duluth, Minnesota. His parents first moved to St. Paul, and a year later when he was 4 years old, to Minneapolis, where he grew up. He went through Minneapolis public schools and received a B.A. degree in English literature from the University of Minnesota.[2]

Minnesota's JewishHistory

Why Would Any Jew Go to Minnesota?

Non-Jews were first drawn to the saw and flour mills. Iron-ore mines made the territories' minerals, timber, and agricultural lands a ready source of investment and employment. Gold was discovered in the Black Hills during the 1870s. The 1862 Homestead Act encouraged farm land ownership. Helstein's family history was consistent with the history of other Jews coming to Minnesota.

During the two-decade period from 1870 to 1890, the Minneapolis population rose from 13,600 to 160,738, and St. Paul's increased from 20,030 to 133,156. The first and most numerous immigrants were Scandinavian, but the largest single ethnic group was from Germany. Published history of Minnesota makes reference to many other ethnic groups but not to Jews.

The first Jews arrived from German-speaking lands in the 1850s and 1860s to trade in furs, to mine gold, to speculate in land, to open stores and small manufacturing ventures, and occasionally to farm. Most arrived in cities such as St. Paul, Minneapolis, or Duluth, and formed Hebrew congregations.[3]

In the 1890s, Jews had been driven out of Eastern Europe by the May Laws, Czarist decrees banning Jews from rural areas, placing quotas on Jews in higher education and the professions. Once in the States, a usual trajectory was to borrow a sufficient sum from fellow Jews to fill a backpack and peddle to surrounding farms and small communities. With his earnings, the recent immigrant would buy a cart and then a horse and buggy and finally would open a small downtown business. Next Jews would band together to meet in homes and stores until they could build a synagogue.[4]

During the 1880s, Eastern European Jews were assisted by the Industrial Removal Office, which sought to settle Jews away from eastern cities, often coming through Galveston, Texas, to the Midwest. B'nai B'rith (Sons of the Covenant) then found them jobs. By coming through Canada and entering by the Great Lakes, these Jews could avoid Ellis Island. A train to Grand Forks, 100 miles away, cost them a penny a mile. So they could say that for a dollar, they could come to America.[5]

Generally, new immigrants to large cities like Minneapolis or St. Paul would settle in downtown neighborhoods, near work and where rent was cheap. "St Paul had two Jewish districts, the West Side and the Capital City area. Minneapolis had its North Side" where Russian Jews (and the Helsteins) lived; Rumanians lived on the South Side. " '[S]ynagogues, kosher butcher shops and other stores catering to Jewish tastes, socialist meeting halls, and Hebrew schools' were available for Yiddish-speaking inhabitants."[6]

A problem for religious Jews in the Midwest was keeping kosher. For women in these communities, this was a constant problem. Sarah Thal, isolated on a farm in what is present-day North Dakota, found it necessary to discard dietary laws in order to feed her family because good health, under Jewish law, was more important than Kashrut (Jewish dietary rules). The Reform movement, which did not require its members to adhere to dietary laws, was more in line with American, particularly Midwest, conditions.[7] By the 1930s, one study showed that no more than 20 percent of Jewish women in Minneapolis kept kosher.[8]

Both Helstein's family and his wife's family were involved in Jewish affairs. Arthur Brin (1880–1947), the father of Rachel, Helstein's wife, was born Arthur Lewinsky in Chicago in 1880. After Brin's father died, his mother moved to join a brother in Minneapolis. There she married Samuel Brin, who adopted Arthur and changed his name to Brin. When Arthur was 16 years old, he took a job with a glass company, and in 1908, he founded his own company, the Brin Glass Company. Brin was

active in Jewish organizations, joining B'nai B'rith in 1905[9] and serving as president from 1909 to 1912. He was active in the Minneapolis Community Chest. He served on boards of the Council for Social Agencies from 1922 to 1947; Jewish Family and Children's Services, other social and Jewish welfare agencies, the Minneapolis Talmud Torah (classes from 1 to 12), and the Round Table of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and was among the founders of the Minnesota Jewish Council and Mt. Sinai Hospital.[10]

Fanny Fligelman Brin (Rachel Helstein's mother), as a small child in 1885, immigrated with her family to Minneapolis from Berlad, Romania.[11] She graduated from the University of Minnesota as the sole female to win the Pillsbury Prize for oratory. In 1906, she graduated Phi Beta Kappa as the only female member of the debate team. Thereafter, she taught English in a Minneapolis high school and was active in the suffragette movement and in the Minneapolis chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.[12]

She was later elected president of the National Council's Minnesota chapter, where she served from 1932 to 1938. In 1938, she undertook a peace-seeking mission to Berlin and Moscow. She was a founder of the National Committee on the Cause and Cure of War. She worked with Jane Adams, Carrie Chapman Catt, and other prominent women to promote world peace.[13]

In 1933, Brin was appointed by Eleanor Roosevelt to the Mobilization of Human Needs Committee. In 1934, with Eleanor Roosevelt and Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, she was nominated as one of the "ten outstanding women" in the world. She continued to be active in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom as well as numerous similar organizations. In 1945, she served as nongovernment organization delegate to the organizing conference of the United Nations.[14]

For a 1994 "Helstein Family Reunion,"[15] "the Helstein story" was described as:

> no different from the classic urban Jewish immigrant experience . . . pioneers who arrived among the earliest Russian Jews (1889) and for some reason selected just about the coldest place in America. And the next generations moved to remote towns where there were few other Jews. . . . The history recounted of these small-town Jews shows that they lived Jewish lives, early photos showing the older men with beards, the younger men in business suits, the older women in black high-collar dresses, and the younger women in modern dress; seeking Jewish education for their children.

Marion Newman recalls her "grandmother kneading the dough to bake the Shabbat bread." She was told that her grandfather, the oldest of the children, came to the United States first and brought the others over. He founded the Talmud Torah in Superior. When her brother was 10 years old, he was sent to a *cheder* (elementary school) in Duluth because there was no Hebrew school in the small community where they lived. Going on family car trips and picnicking was a family tradition.

> I think the idea was to move to a small town, make a fortune and then move to the city, and you never got there. It became a way of living in a small town. There were 10 Jewish families in Brainerd [Minnesota] and we had our own society, and we gathered together for birthdays, anniversaries in different homes. And during the summer we would have a picnic and everyone would make a dish.[16]

Later, the Helsteins followed this pattern. The town in Michigan where they had "a [summer] house was Pentwater. . . . [W]hen we were children we went to northern Minnesota to the boundary waters (the boundary between Minnesota and Canada). . . . [W]e would get there from Ely Minnesota where we would get our provisions and set out to an island on what was called a 'duck' because it could be both land and water transportation."[17]

Minnesota's Jewish Community

In 1935, the University of Minnesota began a study of its General College students who "for one reason or another, were not likely to complete more than two years at the university," a study that surveyed "nearly the entire student population for the academic year 1935–36," six years after Helstein obtained his B.A. at the school. The study showed there were six male students for every 10 women; two-thirds of the students came from the Twin-City area and still lived with their parents. Their parents were mostly native-born Americans who had entered but had not completed high school; the fathers were mostly "employed in upper middle-class occupations" and were "salesmen, office workers, skilled tradesmen, department managers or owners of small businesses."[18]

"Small-Town Jews" Like the Helsteins

Most Jews coming to the United States ended up in big cities. "75 per cent of all Jews reside in thirteen of the largest cities, whereas cities with a population of 500,000 or less account for less than 4 per cent of the total Jewish

population. While in large cities Jews comprise somewhat more than 5 per cent of the population, in the cities of 500,000 or less they comprise somewhat less than 1 percent." According to the same study, "there were two main reasons for Jewish migration to small towns. The first and most frequent was business, and the second was to join relatives who were already established and who could help. The median length of residence . . . was twenty-five years."[19]

Helstein's father worked all his life. Helstein's mother told Helstein that his father would court her "in a big wagon with four white horses that he used to drive with one hand. . . . I remember looking at her in complete amazement at the light that used to come in her eyes when she'd tell me this story."[20]

Helstein's sister, 13 years older than him, became his "surrogate mother" and had a great influence on him. Although his father opposed it, his mother insisted that his sister go to college,[21] selling their carpets to pay for tuition. His sister was the first person in the family to go to college. After she got her B.A. degree in 1918, she continued on to Columbia for a degree in history.[22]

"My mother used to talk Yiddish to me and I loved it and I've never forgiven my sister for wanted me to quit talking Yiddish because she considered Yiddish as somehow mean."[23] For Helstein, Yiddish was a very rich language.[24]

His mother kept an orthodox house. They ate only kosher meats,[25] and she kept different sets of dishes.[26] As a youngster, he could not go swimming or play games on Saturday.[27] Every Saturday from the time he was 9 years old, he rode an hour or more to the Talmud Torah on the North side until he was bar mitzvahed.[28]

"As I was growing up,[29] I had a strong feeling about this question of discrimination.[30] Part of it may be because I was Jewish and when I was a kid, the kids would go along yelling 'sheeny' and I'd be excluded."[31]

A series of incidents during his childhood and early adulthood helped form his views on discrimination and labor issues.

One incident took place on his way to school. There was a black man seated next to an empty seat. Helstein asked an older white woman standing near the seat if she wanted the seat, and she shook her head. Helstein took the seat and heard people muttering. Helstein had been brought up to offer his seat to older people. He understood this incident as discrimination against the black passenger.[32]

Helstein's father owned a small factory that made work pants. The first contact Helstein had with a strike was in his father's plant. The Amalgamated

Clothing Workers had organized the plant. At the time he was 11 years old, his father asked him to drive over to St. Paul, an hour and a half's trip, to pick up a scab and take him through the picket line. Workers would yell, "Scab!" at him. He didn't know what it meant at the time. Finally, Helstein asked his father:

> "You know, I don't understand this. Here's this guy, all the people who I would think his interests are identified with are out there and he's coming to work. . . . I can't comprehend it." My father said: "Well look, this is a form of class warfare." And he wasn't using the term "class" in the Marxian sense because he had never read any Marx nor had any interest in Marx. . . . He said, "That guy isn't any good. He's a traitor to his group." He said, "I wouldn't trust him" [My father] had complete contempt for him even though the scab helped him carry on his business.[33]

Helstein was first exposed to radical literature when his sister married a scholar, Stanley, who had a huge library, including first editions. So at 13 years of age, Helstein was reading Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, the *Book of Mormons*, and some Confucius. He read these books and then would talk about them with Stanley "half the night."

What he had always been told as he grew up was that he would be a lawyer "because from the age of four or five I had been making public speeches." When Helstein was 5 or 6 years old, during the World War I years, he was recruited to make "Your Flag and My Flag" patriotic war bond rally speeches across Minnesota. He had learned a piece called "Your Flag and My Flag" and gave it one day in class. The teacher was so impressed that she had him give it before the whole school. Then he began to appear at civic clubs, and the Great Army of the Republic took him all over the city. He got his mother to buy him a uniform." When he walked down the street "guys would salute me and I'd return it and I'd feel so important."[34]

"If you could speak in those days [it] just meant you could be a good lawyer. But I sort of pushed it away. I still went around making speeches, but I just didn't think I wanted to be a lawyer."[35]

In college, Helstein became interested in Old English, Beowulf and Chaucer, and decided he wanted to be a teacher of old English.[36]

When Helstein was about 18 years old, one of his favorite teachers, Mary Ellen Chase, after he had given a paper on Cardinal Newman's *Epilogia*, called Helstein into her office and told him that he had done a fine job. Then she asked, "What do you think you're going to do? I sense that

you have ideas about going on and teaching English in college." I answered: "Well, I dream about that as one of my fantasies. I certainly would love to do that and I'm gonna try."[37] Then she said:

> Yes, I was afraid that that's probably what you had in mind. . . . I think you ought to understand that it's not a question of whether it's good or bad. It's a fact of life that it's almost impossible for Jews to get jobs on faculties in English departments in colleges around the country. As a matter of fact, I don't know of a single one.

Helstein reacted to this conversation:

> Well, that came as a great blow for many reasons: one, I had never been bothered too much by this problem. I was aware of it obviously. I grew up with fights with kids, but the level of anti-Semitism was always a very primitive kind of nuisance. It never seemed to be anything that could fundamentally affect my life in any way.[38] Of course, I must confess I was very naïve about it. Particularly in Minneapolis I should have known better, but I guess it was because I was so young.

Although there was apparently no anti-Semitism at the University of Minnesota, this was not true of Ivy League universities. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which reduced Southern and Eastern European immigration numbers from a yearly entry rate of 738,000 before World War I to less than 20,000 after its passage.

President A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard University and vice president of the Immigration Restriction League, was the "outspoken leader of efforts to restrict Jewish immigration to America and the admission of Jews to its most prestigious institutions of higher education." Lowell supported the Immigration Act of 1924 aimed at restricting Jewish immigration, and in terms of Harvard, restricting their enrollment. He argued that such restriction would reduce rising anti-Semitism. He believed that "Jews lacked the necessary 'character' for Harvard and could not be true Americans until they gave up their 'peculiar practices.' "[39]

Led by Harvard's president, anti-Semitism was rampant at Ivy League universities. Jews were designated a special group by placing stars of David on their applications. Jews were divided among the seven student residences "in order to . . . spread the burden." English was not the only academic area in which Jews found restrictions in finding teaching positions. Selig Pearlman, a labor economist at the University of Wisconsin, advised Jewish

graduate students in history to change their fields because "history belongs to the Anglo-Saxons." Major universities hesitated to allow Jews, many of whom were regarded as uncultured radicals, to educate the nation's youth about the nation's past. A 1937 report of the American Jewish Committee found it "very difficult these days for Jews to become full professors in the leading universities. . . . [E]xcept for Semitic studies, there were no tenured Jews on the arts and sciences faculty of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Dartmouth."[40]

Additional fuel was added to anti-Semitic fires by the brutal murder of adolescent Bobby Franks by Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold. That all three, murderers and victim, were Jewish did not seem to diminish the "anti-Semitism throughout the nation."[41]

For a young man, Helstein had acquired considerable knowledge about anti-Semitism in Minneapolis and Minnesota as well as its political base: "Minneapolis, in addition to having a radical political tradition, was the most anti-Semitic city that you could find. A Jew couldn't belong to service clubs . . . get into the Lions, the Athletic Club or Automobile Club. . . . [A] very strong WASPish community . . . leaped over from Boston and landed in the Midwest. Minnesota was a very strange state, politically and in many, many other ways. Minneapolis had the largest Trotskyite movement in the country; it had a very big and strong Stalinist movement; it had the Coughlinites, the Silver Shirts were stronger there than any place else."[42] Helstein formed a political perspective on the problem:

> I grew up as these progressive movements started. There was a very close relationship between the LaFollettes in Wisconsin and the Farm-Laborites in Minnesota. Floyd Olson [governor of Minnesota] himself was a Shabbas Goy [a non-Jew who had learned Yiddish by living near or working with Jews and who did favors like turning on lights for Jews on the Sabbath (Saturday) when religious Jews were forbidden to do these tasks.]. He spoke Yiddish flawlessly in his political campaigns. Once a year he would come to the B'nai B'rith meeting and give an entire speech in Yiddish.

The Farmer-Labor Party, whose battle cry was "To Your Tents, O Israel," called itself "the party of the common people."

With this background, the warning given by Helstein's teacher "made a very strong impact on me. . . . Well, I'd had a tremendous interest in Chaucer at the time, and Middle English and I saw that slowly fading away from me; but the problem—what do I do?"

He did not find the prospect of going into his father's business particularly attractive.

> I'm trying to make some decision on what to do. How especially do I do it in a way that it makes mine a meaningful existence in the light of these terrible problems. . . . So I finally decided that even though I had no special talent for it, didn't have the slightest interest in it, what I'd do is become a doctor, because somehow or other a doctor, in spite of himself, couldn't do anything but help people. Even if he wasn't very good at least he would help . . . [I]f I had been a Horowitz or a Heifitz or something then it would have been simple . . . .but in the absence of that a doctor seemed to be the best substitute. This reflected my family's strong drives toward a responsibility to the community. And the sort of thing that came out of the Jewish immigrant background, you know, and a moral responsibility to do good—not in the cynical manner that our friends in Reagan's administration would speak of it, but in many of those in the Democratic administration would, but really the sense that you had an obligation to help people.[43]

So Helstein decided to become a doctor. But he did not have the requisite college courses. He had to take a scientific language course. He chose French, which in its "scientific" form was "just deadly." He discovered that if he took an exam and got at least a B, he would get credit for a year's work. When he didn't pass,[44] "this was the final blow. . . . First of all I was tired of school . . . I said the hell with all this," and he headed for New York City, which he later realized was an attempt to break "my mother's apron strings."

In New York City, work was scarce. Helstein worked at a bookstore as a replacement employee when someone was ill; he entered a Macy's junior executive program for a few weeks and then an insurance company, none of which appealed to him.

During this time, 1929 and 1930, he got repeated messages from his father that his mother was ill. When he did return, he found his mother in a serious depressive state. It was the height of economic bad times, and his father's business was in bad shape. When he returned to take over the business, he was surprised to find that "certain elements" of the business interested him.

His father tried to teach him the fundamentals of the market system. But to him, that concept made no sense.

> My father told me of the business: "What happened was that I bought some cloth, 10,000 yards of a certain kind of fabric that we were to use. . . . [I]t was about 11cents a yard. It was delivered about six weeks later but when it was delivered it was worth only 9 1/2 cents a yard and we had to pay 11 cents." I said to my father, "This is insane. What kind of a system works this way?