FROM THE CINCINNATI REDS TO THE MOSCOW REDS

The Memoirs of Irwin Weil

Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe and Their Legacy

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Compiled and Edited
by **Tony Brown**

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Preface

As a young boy in the 1930s, I became fascinated by the Cincinnati Reds, a team whose ownership rested for five years in the hands of my father, Sidney Weil. My father grew up in the service of the Weil-Mook Horse Stables, which provided an important part of local transportation. He had an unusual strength of personality, a great deal of kindness, and a gift for concentrated hard work—qualities that assisted him in navigating many different Midwestern institutions, including baseball, in which he left an indelible mark.

He was also the father of two girls, but he pinned his hopes on me, his only son, for carrying on the family business. At that time, he never dreamed that his offspring would enter academic life and then, as if that weren't bad enough, would become involved with the Russian language and its literary and musical culture.

Such is the unforeseeable nature of Cincinnati life and the events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This book is an attempt to capture the predominant thoughts and feelings of that time and place by describing some of the happenings that shaped my experience and enabled me to affect—let's hope for the better—other people's lives in the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia.

The concluding chapter contains four letters sent to my parents within a week of my return from traveling to the USSR for the first time. They have all the naiveté of first impressions, in spite of the fact that I had previously studied the language and culture. They also have some of the freshness and vitality connected with first impressions.

The reader will notice extensive footnotes throughout. For those who are specialists in Slavic languages and literature and Jewish studies, such footnotes will simply present what they already know, whereas for non-specialists, they will provide helpful details.

The reader also will quickly notice that I have not presented all of the memories in strict chronological order. Rather, I have organized them according to my recollection of them over a life of four score plus six years. From Cincinnati to Moscow, I have participated in many institutions and have encountered numerous languages and cultures. Not without some defeats and disappointments, I have been fortunate enough to taste many of the world's delights. I hope that the following pages will arouse the interest and emotional participation of the attentive reader.

Acknowledgments

I could not have produced these memoirs without the loving support of my beautiful and intelligent wife of sixty-four years and friend for even longer, Vivian Max Weil.

It is also the case that this book would never have seen the light of day without the energetic, intelligent prodding, and continual help of my friend and colleague Tony Brown of Brigham Young University.

-Irwin Weil

Editor's Note

In 2012 I invited Irwin Weil to deliver two guest lectures at Brigham Young University. His lectures, titled "Pushkin: An Aristocrat of African Descent whose Reading of Shakespeare in French Profoundly Influenced His Febrile Imagination" and "Russian Composers and the Clash Over the Issue of Nationalism" were received enthusiastically by students and faculty alike. When the auditoriums emptied and we had a chance to talk in private, I asked Irwin: "You have such a wealth of personal stories involving cultural figures about whom most of us today can only read. Have you written down these accounts?" His reply: "Every time I attempt to write them down, they just don't come out the same as when I tell them." I couldn't help but propose: "Irwin, how about if you tell your stories to me and I record and transcribe them? Once they're on paper, I'll go back and edit them for the reader." I'm pleased to say that he accepted my proposal, which set in motion the events leading up to this book.

The following summer, I traveled to Chicago and spent several days interviewing Irwin. While I prepared some general questions in advance, I mostly tried to clue in on key points that would arise during our discussions and construct questions accordingly. Our conversations resulted in many hours worth of oral recordings, which I subsequently transcribed with the help of my research assistants, Lydia Roberts and Adam Rodger.

Stitching the transcribed material together into a cohesive narrative presented a number of challenges, including determining whether to follow a strict chronological versus topical approach. I think the reader will find that the resulting manuscript represents a careful blending of the two. The question of tone also arose, i.e., should the finished product preserve the spontaneity of the oral interview or adopt a more polished, academic tone? When considering this question, I recalled Irwin's words to me: "Every time I attempt to write them down, they just don't come out

the same as when I tell them." Accordingly, I set about editing the text with the goal in mind of preserving, to the extent possible, Irwin's masterful oratorical voice. Ultimately, the reader will have to be the judge as to the success of such an ambitious and, perhaps, presumptuous endeavor.

After completing a draft manuscript, I highlighted people, places, and things for which I thought a non-specialist in Slavic and Jewish studies might appreciate having some background information. In order to ensure a consistent voice in both the text and footnotes, I brought Irwin to Brigham Young University where he recorded responses for each of the highlighted items. Thus, the footnote material that appears in this volume represents a transcription of the recordings made during his visit.

Transliterations of Russian dialogue follow the Library of Congress system; however, when transliterating names of persons, places, and things, I generally favored commonly used transliterations, e.g., Maxim Gorky versus Maksim Gor'kii, Suzdal versus Suzdal', and *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* versus *Novoie Russkoie Slovo*.

–Tony Brown

Chapter One

The Lives of Sidney and Florence Weil

Sidney Weil (23 December 1891-14 January 1966)
Florence Levy Weil (November 1891-15 January 1998)

In dealing with tough times, ya gotta use horse sense.
—Sidney Weil

Ancestry

My father's great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather both came to the United States from Surburg, a small town in Alsace—at that time, in the 1850s, a part of German culture (in France politically). Surburg is about forty kilometers (about twenty-six miles) north of Strasbourg, the most important city in the region. Gabriel Weil, my great-great-grandfather, made his living, like many German-speaking Jews of the time, by selling vegetables along a route between the large city and his small hometown. After the great European revolutions of 1848,[1] the currency collapsed and the Weils decided to try their industry and their luck in the American Midwest and South. They came to the banks of the Ohio River in Cincinnati, where economic development and commerce were proceeding vigorously. The Ohio proved to be no worse than the Rhine had been. Indeed, the future proved it a lot better and far less mortal for Jews.

1 In 1848, there were a series of revolutions that broke out across Western and Central Europe. These revolutions lasted for a year and caused the powers that be great anxiety; however, they eventually were put down.

My father's father, Isaac (after whom I received my Hebrew name, Yitzkhak), started peddling vegetables, like his grandfather, in Cincinnati. An oft-repeated story maintains that he was melodiously hawking his vegetables one day from a pushcart when a professor from the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music heard him and insisted on the spot that he study vocal music. Whatever the attractions of music may have been for Isaac, he soon gave up both his notes and his vegetables for a partnership in the main transportation business of the latter part of the nineteenth century—horse stables run by the Mook family, who had earlier come to the United States from Bavaria. Thanks to this partnership, Isaac married one of the Mook daughters, named Minnie, who was a very strong woman of old-fashioned German-Bavarian-Jewish stock; her personality left an indelible imprint on the family. Minnie went on to become the mother of three boys, the oldest of whom was Sidney. Thanks also to this partnership between my grandfather and the Mook family, Sidney was born into the business of buying, managing, and selling horses.

Sidney Weil

From almost his earliest days, Dad remembered with pleasure and passion his time working in the stables and the judging of good, as well as bad, horseflesh. He took to the tricks of the trade very quickly and ably, much more so than to those of formal schooling, which he found an utter bore, and this boredom with schooling continued throughout his life. However, he deeply believed in formal education, both Jewish and secular, for others but never for himself. He could read and pray beautifully in Hebrew and in English, but he left school after fourth grade, which he once flunked and then repeated; he never learned the third person singular of the verb "to do"—Dad always said, "He don't." He also learned a little "Cincinnati Deutsch." "Mit a bissel Englisch, das glinkt ja, so wunder schoen" (With a little bit of English, everything goes so well) is an example of a song in the Alsacian dialect that he repeated many times in his life. Dad didn't know German as well as his mother, Minnie, but attended public schools that taught in German for part of every day.

In 1914, when Dad was twenty-two years old, World War I started to kill its European young men in huge numbers in a fight that only

increased the rapidity with which a social order was tearing itself apart. Dad was not much interested in European history or politics but he knew, as most Americans did, that sooner or later the United States would become involved. He also knew that some of his distant relatives with the name Weil in Alsace would be affected. By 1917 it was clear that the United States would enter the war on the side of the Allied powers. One eventual result of the war was that Alsace was made part of France instead of remaining part of Germany.

The US government was in the market for large numbers of horses for training soldiers and military transport. Dad was sent by his beloved father to Washington, DC to try to negotiate the sale of some fine horseflesh. While there in DC, the young fellow also had stern instructions to find his female cousin at a dance and make sure that her card was filled up with partners for every set of quadrilles and foxtrots. He intended to do what he was told until he encountered a lovely and attractive young woman named Florence Levy. That meeting made him put his family's instructions out of consciousness. After learning why he came to Washington, she primly ordered him to do his duty. He scampered about the ballroom with his usual energy and force, and soon a whole list of cavaliers had been assigned to his cousin. When Florence saw the evidence, she graciously consented to dance with the Cincinnati bundle of energy.

Florence Levy

My mother was born as the eldest of six children. In 1893 her parents emigrated from a small town in Lithuania called Popilon to Charleston, West Virginia. With a pack on his back, her father traveled among coal miners to sell everyday necessary goods. When my mother was in the sixth grade, her father died. The burden of supporting the family fell upon her, since her mother spoke Yiddish and was illiterate in English. The Jewish community tried to set up the young girl with a small store, but its business turned out to be beyond her capacities to manage. Luckily, a local scion of an aristocratic Virginia family, Adam Littlepage, recognized in Mom the energy and intelligence necessary to help him in his practice of law. He also had empathy for the needs of her fatherless family.

After hiring her, he soon came to realize that he had made the right choice; she gave him the kind of help and support that his growing practice desperately needed.

Soon the attorney's little practice in West Virginia was traded for an office in Washington, DC. Shortly after the beginning of World War I, Mr. Littlepage ran a successful campaign to enter the US House of Representatives. He resisted the attempts of influential people to place one of their family members in his office, and Mom soon found herself ensconced as a very young and attractive woman working as chief secretary and assistant in the office building of the US House of Representatives. Often when Mr. Littlepage found himself harassed or burdened by a pesky constituent, he would dictate a very angry letter of response. Mom would ask him if he really wanted to send it off, and he would reply with a vigorous—perhaps even mildly profane—affirmative. On the following day he would come to regret his impulsiveness and say, "I wish I hadn't sent the blasted thing." Florence, after asking him if he really meant that, would produce the letter that she had put, not in the post office drop box, but in her desk drawer.

Mr. Littlepage came to depend heavily on the young person he affectionately called "Little One." Years later, in the midst of a solidly conservative group of Cincinnati citizens, Mom proudly reminisced about the fact that she had once danced with Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he was Secretary of the Navy, some years before he contracted polio. In the midst of a Republican family, she quietly mused that the man she had danced with could not be entirely bad!

When constituents would come to the Littlepage office, they would sometimes say to Mom: "We know what a good West Virginia girl likes best," and they would produce a delicious sandwich crammed with fine, West Virginia ham. Florence, who came from a religious Orthodox Jewish family, would never even think of consuming non-kosher meat. She, therefore, had the task of diplomacy: With deep thankfulness she accepted the *treyf*[2] goods and assured the donor that she anticipated a magnificent lunch. Later, she would give the sandwich to a colleague who was delighted

2 The word *treyf* in Hebrew is the word for "non-kosher," that is to say, the kind of food that should not be consumed by those who are obeying the biblical laws of kosher.

to receive it and who would then consume it with West Virginia enthusiasm.

There was a dilemma in Mom's life: to continue working in Mr. Littlepage's office so she could send money to her family, or to allow my father's courtship to advance. Initially Mom tried to block the horse dealer's advances, including a box of chocolates that he attempted to send her. She indignantly refused the gesture, which she considered improperly forward, but she, from an Eastern-European background (her parents had emigrated from Lithuania, which was part of the Tsar's Russian Empire), did not at first appreciate the reality of German stubbornness. Dad would never let a mere refusal interfere with his well-laid plans. But when he later popped the vital question, she replied that she couldn't possibly consider an acceptance. After all, how would the family survive without the money she sent them? Dad replied that he would bring the whole gang to Cincinnati, send her younger brothers to college, and find good, respectable work for her sisters. (In those days, it wouldn't have occurred to Dad that the young women might get a higher education. In later years, that mindset had changed mightily when he demanded that his own daughters enroll as students at the University of Cincinnati, whether they wished to or not.)[3]

However, there was one more obstacle to the proposal: Mr. Littlepage was not eager to lose his important assistant. He demanded to see the

3 When my two sisters, both older than I, went to college, the oldest went with great pleasure. She was both brave and very creative. The second oldest, Margie, loved fun. "I don't want to go to college," she would say, to which my father would reply, "You're going to go to college if I have to drive you with a whip!" She didn't have the nerve to say, "But you quit school!" so she went to college. Conversely, my two aunts had to go to work. The younger one eventually worked for a bank that was in the Federal Reserve System. During the war, the men had to go and the boss realized that my aunt was a woman with some brains. He said, "Look, you should become an inspector. What you should do is take a couple of courses in statistics at the local university, and you can become an inspector in the Federal Reserve System." Soon thereafter she became (I'm pretty sure) the first woman inspector in the part of the Federal Reserve System that included Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. She would go around inspecting banks. When she came to town, by God, they had to show her the books, and she did all of the things an inspector does, which was quite remarkable for a woman in her position who had never received a higher education. And yet, she was very skillful in this line of work. After retiring, she became a tutor for kids in the local public school. She lived to be 103 years old.

young fellow. Little did the estimable gentleman know that he was facing the best horse salesman west of the Appalachians. At the end of an hour's conversation, Mr. Littlepage emerged from his office and exclaimed: "What a wonderful young man, Little One. Marry him at once!"

Joining the Army

But marriage would have to wait until after the war. In the army, Dad served as a quartermaster sergeant and was responsible for feeding the men around him. His description of those days included quite a few times when men got a special treat (thanks to supplies that he had wrangled), often having to do with sweets or ice cream. From the sound of his voice in reminiscing or singing about those days, I gathered that he loved the army songs of World War I.

However, he had at least one source of dissatisfaction: Dad tended not to order bacon for the soldiers' breakfast since bacon is not kosher. According to later stories told by my father, the men would grumble about the absence of bacon. Several replied that Weil was Jewish, didn't they know that? How could they expect bacon? Dad's reply (in his own words, many years after) was, "What's the matter? Aren't you eating well under me?" The pitch of his voice would go way down—the way it often did when he suddenly got very serious. The soldiers would reply, "Yes, but bacon is a good thing, too, you know!" "All right," Dad retorted. "From now on you'll have some bacon." But you can be sure that this particular quartermaster sergeant never touched it. Abstention from non-kosher meat and fish was something Dad continued for his entire life, and all his friends and business associates—Jew and Gentile alike—knew about it.

Not only was Dad loyal and kind to his troops, he also cared about his own family in Germany. He tried to look up some of his relatives in Alsace to see if they had experienced difficulties. After finding out that they were not in bad straits, he left matters at that. Evidently seeing his relatives was less important to him than helping them if they had needed his aid. That was characteristic of him for his entire life: Dad was the one to give help and support. Simply visiting relatives whom he had never seen, in a country whose language he knew imperfectly but from whose boundaries

and customs his own beloved family had come, did not arouse his curiosity or strong interest.

Any talk of fighting or killing in the War to End All Wars was never discussed in our home. It was as if Dad's spirit was completely separated from the mass killing and trench warfare of World War I. Politics did not seem to affect his memories of the war either. When I was much smitten with French culture, he told me that the impressively clean German houses he saw after the war appealed to him much more than the less-than-clean French houses he saw. It was hard for me to accept, especially in view of the fact that France was our ally in both world wars, but he insisted on German cleanliness.

After the War

After the end of World War I, Dad was very eager to get back to his business in Cincinnati. He sensed that American business would change drastically, and he wanted to jump into the situation with his characteristic verve and energy. He could not do this as long as he was a soldier, and he ached for demobilization. Of course he had not forgotten the comely secretary to Congressman Littlepage. Many letters and telegrams came to Miss Florence Levy, and she tried as hard as she could to prevail on the US government to demobilize a soldier from Cincinnati.

My parents were married on 1 July 1919. After Florence added Weil to her last name, the two of them departed on a honeymoon to the western states. National parks were important to my parents. Conversation about the great parks, especially Yellowstone, was staple around the house for all the eighteen years I spent growing up there; it became a kind of folklore for the family.

The Roaring Twenties

During the 1920s, Dad was full of ambition and energy, but he was not completely ruthless or as aggressive as the famous business tycoons are often pictured. Dad set out to become a real tycoon: rich, influential, creative, and helpful to others in need. He realized that his beloved horses were on the way out and that the new mode of popular transportation would be automobiles. His experience in buying and selling horses and

providing transportation for the area prepared him admirably for what would become the commercial vortex of the storm of buying and selling automobiles. He managed to get involved with the sale of the elder Henry Ford's products, and he soon became a general agent for Ford in Cincinnati in the early 1920s.

The stories about this time when Dad sold cars were legion. It soon became clear that Dad knew how to control costs and prices in a way to make the business thrive. It also became clear that he was a person of unusual directness and honesty. I heard many stories from other people about how Dad would return money if he got more for a trade-in than he expected—he would go out of his way to find the person and return the excess. When I would ask him about this transaction, he would literally snort and say that of course he did that—it was only good business! His favorite story was about the loaves that grew after being thrown in the water: "When you throw loaves of bread upon the water, they come back to you in greatly increased numbers."[4] He may even have distorted the story, but his point was the increase this action brought about. "Don't ask me how it happens," he said, "but it happens. I see it happen every time."

His honesty had a very rough side that offended some people but was legend among all. If a person came to him with a business proposal, he said exactly what he thought. If he thought the proposal was nonsense, sparing the person's feelings did not occur to him. This often drove my mother, who was more soft-spoken (but no less tough), to distraction. But not even she could get him to change his public manners. The insulted person would often redden with anger and hurt and leave the office. Later, however, that same person would return for more advice because he or she knew that advice represented Dad's honest opinion, built on a great deal of energy and thought. Dad could be wrong, but he would never say what he did not believe.

A few years later came one of those central episodes that expressed Dad's character. Henry Ford learned that my father, the marvelous general

4 This story represents an admixture of Old and New Testament teachings. From the Old Testament, "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days" (Eccles. 11:1, Authorized [King James] Version). From the New Testament, the miracle of "The Feeding of the 5,000," which appears in all four canonical Gospels: Matt. 14:13–21, Mark 6:31–44, Luke 9:10–17, and John 6:5–15 (AV).

agent in Cincinnati, was Jewish. Ford then decided that Dad would have to go. The auto mogul and inventor of both mass production and the assembly line told Dad in no uncertain terms where he could and should go. Dad told Ford to take the matter to court and "show the judge" exactly where in the contract it stated that a Jew could not be a general agent. "If," said Dad, "the judge of an American court decides in your favor, I'll leave immediately and quietly. If he decides in my favor, I'll sue the pants off you!" Mr. Ford may have been a bigot, but he was no fool in business and he backed away.

Dad went right on with his vigorous business dealings and did not stop with automobiles. In very many of his activities, his brothers were closely involved. One of his early actions was to buy a piece of real estate on favorable terms in North Avondale, still far from where Jews lived in Cincinnati. He wanted to use this house to establish a Jewish part of the city's burial business. The result was the beginning of the Weil Brothers Funeral Home to offer burial services in a completely Jewish way (they would also do it in a partly Jewish way if the family wanted). The business became very profitable, and Dad had many reasons later on to be happy with his initiative. As he became more and more successful during what came to be called the Roaring Twenties, Dad got bolder and bolder and considerably more reckless with the investment of his and his brothers' money. He acquired controlling interest in a bank and helped establish garages, cleaners, and other business establishments in Cincinnati. He also joined in the national madness at that time: he bought stock on margin, paying only for a part of its value, hoping to maximize profits in a constantly rising market.

Faith and Family

Yet one of the deepest parts of Dad's life, and certainly the center of his faith, was his attachment to Judaism and to the Isaac M. Wise Temple in Cincinnati.[5] His personal feelings were attached to traditional, Orthodox forms of prayer and behavior. Every morning, except on Saturdays (*Shabbos*[6]),

5 The Isaac M. Wise Temple is a reformed Jewish temple in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is named in honor of the major figure who established Reform Judaism in the United States.

6 *Shabbat* (Hebrew: שַׁבָּת, "cease, rest," the Ashkenazic pronunciation is *Shabbos*) is the word for "Sabbath." It's a day that starts at sundown on Friday and continues until

he put on his *tefillen*, or *phylacteries*.[7] Dad followed tradition: he went through the traditional prayers in exactly the traditionally prescribed form. On Friday and Saturday nights, he would make *kiddush*[8] and *havdalah*[9] with the wondrous spice box and plaited three-wick beeswax candles, which he made himself, together with our whole family. His deep voice rendered the prayers in what I can only describe as Dad's own personal Cincinnati Hebrew. He made an unforgettable picture and sound. This was true largely because his feelings were so clearly consonant with the sounds.

As Orthodox as were his feelings, however, he gave his complete organizational loyalty to the American Jewish Reform Movement, whose founding leader, Isaac Meyer Wise, gave his name to the congregation that Dad made an important part of his life's work. In Jewish community life, Dad dealt with many interesting people, including one Rabbi Shmuel Vul, who was born in the Ukrainian part of the Russian Tsar's Empire and at the age of fifteen had exchanged a letter with Leo Tolstoy.[10] When the young man came to the United States, he called himself Samuel Wohl. He

sundown on Saturday. On this day, Jews are not supposed to travel by vehicle or do any work. Rather they are simply supposed to pray, eat, and study religious works.

7 *Tefillin* (Hebrew: תפילין, the English word is "phylacteries") are leather straps that observants use six days a week, excluding the Sabbath. They wind them around their arms and also around their forehead to fulfill a famous prayer: "And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes" (Deut. 6:8, King James Version). There is a small box that has the prayer inside of it that is attached to the leather that you wear between your eyes. The straps on the arms eventually form Hebrew letters when they get to the hands. These straps are to show that you are aware of the most important divine commandments.

8 *Kiddush* (Hebrew: קידוש, "sanctification") is the blessing for sanctifying wine or the fruit of the vine before the Sabbath, and the introductory blessing also is recited before any holiday or season when partaking of the fruit of the vine.

9 *Havdalah* (Hebrew: הַבְדָּלָה, "separation") is the separation of the holy time that is celebrated on the Sabbath and the time that comes after it, which is the week. There is a famous *Havdalah* service involving a three-pronged candle that observants light every Saturday night at sundown when the Sabbath is going out and the secular week is once again coming in. It's a division between the sacred and the secular.

10 Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (9 September 1828-20 November 1910) was one of the most famous writers in the world. He was a Russian novelist who wrote incredibly powerful novels, the two most famous ones being *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. He was a very important figure, not only in Russian literary life, but in Russian social and political life as well.

was as Russian in his temperament as my father was German, and the two became instant friends. Some of the more hoity-toity members of the congregation resented his Russian accent when he spoke English, although after my studies in Russian, I now know it was rather light.

Such attempts at snubbing Rabbi Wohl by certain members of the congregation infuriated Dad and further inclined him in the Rabbi's favor. The fact was that Samuel Wohl was a hardworking, sincerely feeling Rabbi, who had all kinds of new, reforming ideas that were on the move at the time. Rabbi Wohl had a very pleasant wife, and soon the two families were close to one another. Rabbi Wohl felt the helping side of his new friend in many practical areas of life. He also had an instinctive appreciation of the rare kind of Jewish spirit in Dad and realized what that energy could do for Judaism in Cincinnati. Above all, he liked and valued Dad's passion and sometimes childlike nature.

Over the span of eight years, my parents had three children. My sister Carolyn was born in 1920 and Marjorie in 1922. Dad, however, was still eager to have a son. Finally, after several miscarriages, I was born in 1928.

In that same year of 1928, Dad was organizing a campaign of stock buying, engendering all kinds of cartoons and gossip in the Cincinnati newspapers that would end in the spring of 1929 with him as the majority

Sidney and Florence Weil family. Father Sidney (standing), (left to right) Irwin, sister Carolyn, maternal grandmother Mary Levy, mother Florence, and sister Marjorie.