

To Remember My Father

Number 8, February 20, 1978

On January 23, just as I was trying to organize my thoughts on the significance in my life of Chauncey D. Leake, my father died. In referring to Chauncey I called him my friend and mentor. There can be no doubt that he was a father image for me as well. But I would not have wanted my dad to feel that he was less than an ideal father, so I left this thought unsaid.

Actually, Ernest Garofano, born May 2, 1904, was my step-father. The similarity in our surnames is purely coincidental. He married my mother when I was eleven, after they had been going together over three years. About a year after they were married, my brother Ralph was born. But even long before they were married I thought of him as my father, because he gave me the love, care and attention that my biological father did not.

My mother's marriage to Ernest Garofano after the failure of her first marriage tells in microcosm the story of thousands of American families. Not only was I the product of a broken home (a key stimulus for success, according to some sociologists), but also of an "inter-marriage."

Today the marriage of black and white people is already commonplace. And the marriage of Jewish and Catholic people is quite ordinary. When I was a child, however, my mother's announcement of her plans to marry sent shock waves through both families. But my step-father, a strongly stubborn man, persisted even after the most devastating attempts by my mother's family to discourage him. Later on he became a favorite of all of them. After 40 years of marriage to my mother, few people could believe he was Italian and not Jewish.

I have rarely met a more devoted husband. He nursed my mother in her final years, until his own health declined. After she died in 1976 he became a new person. All of us then realized how much his lively personality had been smothered by my mother's illness. He was an endless source of humorous stories about the old days, and had a remarkable memory for small events. I greatly enjoyed hearing his stories and listening to his New York dialect and his heavy New York accent. In some ways he was like Archie Bunker, but the pre-

judices of his language never were reflected in his treatment of people.

I have often wondered what effect a good education would have had on my father. I don't think he finished grammar school. He was only 2 years old when he came to America from a small town in Italy near Naples. His father, a construction worker, was accidentally killed on the job when my dad was seven.

In America his life of poverty was not unusual for the time. He worked hard and eventually became an itinerant butcher and meat department manager for the A&P supermarket in Westchester County. There he learned to work for the super-rich who occupied the big houses in Scarsdale and similar wealthy suburbs. This experience gave him an insight into a culture vastly different from what he had lived in. Later, during the second World War, he worked with my uncle, Sam Wolf, in still another environment—the garment district of New York.

After the war he bought and operated his own taxi in New York City. His ten years as a hackie—an occupation I too worked at briefly—proved an endless source of stories he would tell us at the dinner table.

He always loved cars. I well remember riding around in the rumble seat of his Chevrolet. Sunday was always a day for a ride somewhere—often to Mt. Vernon, where he had lived, or Kensico Dam or some similar scenic spot. My dad had an instinctual love of botany,

and could name most flowers and trees. I still can't tell an oak from a walnut. During the war he had a "victory garden" just outside Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx.

He also appreciated the importance of food in our lives. He was our resident expert on meat and fish, and was always responsible for carving turkeys or roasts. But he was the slowest eater I ever met. And he never changed, even though all the rest of us ate as though food was going out of style.

Like Chauncey, my father died quite unexpectedly. Perhaps both of them could have lived many more happy and healthy years. But more years might have brought a slow and undignified end to their lives. I am thankful that neither of them suffered the agonies of a prolonged death.

My father could not, of course, provide the intellectual stimulation one finds in a Chauncey Leake. But the academic or intellectual or business life can easily become divorced from reality. Practical abilities and common sense are also necessary. You can't do much writing, abstract thinking, or anything else if the plumbing doesn't work. My dad was not artistic, but he was a "fixer" who could repair almost anything. And he had endless patience.

My father was a Rock of Gibraltar for me. He was always there when I needed him. In so many little ways I still say to myself, "Dad will take care of that." And then I realize he's gone.