

New Nonfiction from Philip Alcables: “Peppina”



1. A Child

A neglected box in the back of my closet contains a contain a collection of items from my father's apartment, I find. In the midst of a stack of curling black-and-white photo prints there is one that I don't remember having seen before. About two inches by three, it's a photo from the war. My father's war, the one he referred to as "the" war. It's a picture of a girl of eight or nine or ten, a bow on the right side of her dark hair, her mouth wide, dark eyes squinting slightly into the sun. She's wearing a pinafore that is just a little too big for her. She is sitting tenuously—posed?—atop a low wall. On the back of the print, written in cursive in a feminine hand, is one word: "Peppina."

Who are you, *signorina*?

The photo is clearly from Italy. My father had been a bombardier-navigator on a B24 crew in the 15th US Army Air Force, based at Pantanella, east of the Apennines. It would be 1944, then. In the photo, the sun is shining bright, casting onto Peppina a shadow of the trunk and limbs of a tree that must have been behind the photographer. In the background, an American enlisted man in a flight cap and leather jacket is leaving a building, oblivious to the photographing going on nearby. He's also squinting against the Italian sunshine.

Who took your photo? Definitely not my father: he hated taking photographs, all his life. From the war, he kept photos of himself, his plane, his crew, some pictures of bombing targets, a few shots taken through the right-side waist gunner's window of the other B24s of his squadron, up above the Alps. But why did my father have your photo at all? And why did he keep it for so long—for the sixty-eight years remaining to him?

I wonder if you were one of those poor *bambini Pugliese*, the ones whose hunger and misery he mentioned often during my

childhood, especially when I wouldn't finish my supper. But in the photo you look clean and your clothes aren't ragged. You seem healthy.

Were you the daughter of someone who worked at the base, maybe a cook or a cleaner? My father was always at ease with children (far more so than he ever was with adults; he always seemed to feel that adults had some racket going). Children's openness to the world matched his. Children are ever on their way to becoming something but never there yet.

Or were you the younger sister of an Italian girl he loved? My father grew up speaking *Ladino* (or Judaeo-Español), late-medieval Spanish with some Hebrew, Arabic, and sometimes Greek or Turkish mixed in. His parents were Sephardim born in the Ottoman Empire, who had come to New York in the 1910s as teenagers. Speaking what his family called *Spanyol*, he understood enough Italian, and could make himself understood. And he *looked* Italian: black hair and olive skin, a slim boy with kind eyes (and a handsome uniform). So was there a girlfriend? Other, I mean, than the young woman back home in Queens who would become his wife and my mother. Were you the sister of a Laura, a Rafaella, an Antonella—someone he couldn't speak of?

Or had your photo originally belonged to an unlucky buddy of my father's? Did one of the bombers miss the landing strip? Was the photo retrieved after the men of the 777th Squadron brought in the bodies of the dead, after someone went through the pockets of their charred uniforms and gave the snapshot to my father for safekeeping? Did he keep it for so long because it was a memorial to a dead friend?

2. Fate

Early on, I learned that a person in war needs luck. The belongings of the dead signal something about luck in the drama of Fate. To discard what the universe has touched is to

play with Fate. When I was growing up, my father had no patience for men who proclaimed their heroism in WWII. *His* treasure was, forever, a specific commemoration of the play of Fate: eating real (i.e., not powdered) scrambled eggs after returning from a mission. Eating scrambled eggs was not just a pleasure for him, but a kind of celebration of good luck. Call it grace.

My father said he had been lucky to be on a crew whose commander was a competent pilot. The man was a “son of a bitch” (the third most disparaging epithet my father could bestow, after “bastard” and “prick” but before “schmuck”), but he was a good leader. My father was also lucky not to have been a gunner. He was 5 foot 6, there weren’t too many men who were shorter than he was, and the shortest gunner was generally assigned to the ball turret. Even before I read Jarrell’s poem, I knew what happened to ball-turret gunners.

He was lucky that his plane didn’t malfunction, drop out of the air, skid off a runway. He was lucky when cloud cover hid his plane from radar. He was lucky that the flak (he tended to refer to it with the onomatopoeic “ack-ack”) never brought his plane down. He was lucky that, after his crew came back over the Alps into Italy, fighter planes piloted by Tuskegee Airmen—the Red Tails, as he called them, whose record of safely escorting Army Air Force bombers was the best of all fighter groups—brought him back to base safe.

He was lucky that he didn’t fall out through the open bomb bay doors. Sometimes a bomb would get fouled on the rack and fail to drop. It was the bombardier’s job to walk out on the narrow catwalk (no parachute because he couldn’t fit through the hatch with it) and finagle it loose with his boot, the terrain of Czechoslovakia or Romania rushing past a few thousand feet below, just a skinny young man in a lined flight suit, freezing air, wind, gravity, and luck.

He was lucky to be a Jew. The story, which he told more than

once, was that a flight-training commander, a Southerner whom he knew to be an anti-Semite, had flunked him out of pilot training after only one trip up in the open-cockpit trainer. You were supposed to get two chances, he said, but this guy ("the bastard") had learned that he was a Jew and failed him after only one flight. The Army sent him to navigator and bombardier training instead, and then shipped him to Italy. The luck of it, he said, was that if he had become a fighter pilot, he was sure, the Messerschmitt 109s would have made short work of him.

My father's universe was thoroughly perfused with mystery, although nothing made him like religion, not even being shot at. He never prayed in any conventional way. Religious rites to him were a kind of farce: people put on costumes and bow or kneel, fast or feast—putting on the agony, he always called it, from a 1920's music-hall song: "puttin' on the agony/puttin' on the style." Making too much of yourself. As if, for *you*, the universe cares.

Fate is the universe's lack of interest in you. You do your best, you live your life, and the universe either looks after you, or it doesn't. My father's mother died of a heart condition when she was 23 years old. His mother's father had a heart attack on the stairs to the Third Avenue Elevated not long after that. He died, too. My father's aunt Fortunée, who had moved from the ancestral home in Edirne, Turkey, to France in the 1930s, survived the Nazi occupation in Paris by passing for a gentile. Her brother, his uncle Gabriel, died in the camps. My father was not yet 4 when his mother died, but he lived to age 89.

When my father did die, in a hospice in the Bronx, Hurricane Sandy blew into New York. Trees fell. The seas overtopped the land. It has made me feel that he was probably right about the universe and Fate.

3. Children

Even before I knew anything about fighters and bombers, battles, missions, weapons, camaraderie, uniforms, or luck in battle, I learned that war is about children. I learned that I was fortunate beyond measure to live without either war or poverty. I was a child myself, probably 5 or 6 years old, when my father first told me about the ragged children of Apulia. I had decent clothing and I didn't know real hunger. My father had been poor as a child—raised, as he liked to remind me, in a walkup tenement whose residents shared toilets, one water closet in the hallway on each floor, near the stairs. Those Italian children around his base were even poorer than he had been.

That my father was barely more than a child himself when he flew on bombing missions, that the bombs he dropped from his airplane onto oil refineries or marshalling yards must have injured or killed people and that some of those people were children—those things only dawned on me later. That his airman buddies would also have been barely out of childhood. The girls in Naples, where he went once on leave, must also have been children, too. Sexually knowledgeable, but still children.

When I was in my teens, “the war” was the one in Vietnam. To my view, it involved American children, not much older than me, killing Vietnamese children, as well as adults, with horrific weaponry. The son of my mother's friend, a boy two years older than me, flew with a Medevac helicopter crew; they shipped his remains home. When I played second base, the shortstop was a classmate whose older brother had died in Vietnam. Among us 9th and 10th graders, arguments for and against that war were so *personal*. War seems like something that 14- and 15-year-olds shouldn't have to know about. Yet so often it's their whole world.

Morally outraged by the war in Vietnam, preoccupied with it, and of course mortally frightened that I might be drafted and

forced to fight it, I asked my father what had prompted him to volunteer for the military in *his* war. At first, the answer was that he had always been fascinated by airplanes, and wanted to be a flier. Another answer was that he didn't want to be drafted; once the war broke out, he knew that draftees would go into the infantry or a tank unit. Later, he said that he had had to "fight Hitler." By the time he was in his eighties, the reason had been that he had felt he had to stop Hitler from killing Jews.

I'm sure he meant all of those. Motivations are complex, after all, and elusive. The poignant one, never expressed to me but always evident, was his connection to a universe that was magically full of possibility. America should stand for something—something that Europe had lost, or reneged on. Not freedom, which everyone talks about. Something more like fairness. Or just beneficence, spread as widely as could be. Which amounts, I suppose, to *hope*. Strange as it sounds, I think my father fought for hope.

I watched the 1968 Democratic National Convention on the TV in our living room with my parents and their friends Stan and June. The set was tuned to CBS; the avuncular Walter Cronkite was in the broadcasting booth in Chicago. I remember the night air, the August humidity, the front and back doors open in hopes of catching a breeze, all of us drinking the lemon-flavored iced tea that my mother let me prepare from a Lipton packet and tap water, poured over ice into tall glasses. Maybe the green floor fan, much older than I was, was moving some air around the room. The adults were talking about Hubert Humphrey and LBJ; about Allard Lowenstein, a friend of friends of theirs and a delegate at the convention; about the war.

The televised coverage cut to scenes on Michigan Avenue, where policemen were pushing young demonstrators to the ground, clubbing them—even the girls, to my astonishment— and hauling them into vans that would take them to jail. Beating American children on live television. Not Black children in Alabama,

which my parents decried but seemed to attribute to a system that they were sure would soon collapse, but *white* children. Kids who looked like me, just a few years older (indeed, some of them were the older siblings of friends of mine). Beating children not in Montgomery but Chicago.

I stood up from the floor, where I had been sitting, my mouth fallen open, speechless. My father stood from the sofa where the adults were seated. "No!," he cried out in the hot night. "Not in America!! This is *America*! We don't do that *here*! It's not what we fought for!" Anguish was in his voice, heartbreak on his face.

White kids beaten by police and arrested, Black kids beaten by police and arrested. In our largely Jewish neighborhood of small private homes with neat yards, my father was among the outspoken upholders of civil rights for Black Americans. I know he was furious at the Jim Crow laws down South, lynchings, assaults on civil rights demonstrators. Among all the disturbing news in the papers in the 1960s, it was the brutality of Southerners toward Black citizens to which he always drew my attention. Separate water fountains. Beatings, dogs, and fire hoses. We studied the civil rights movement together, he and I. He explained to my friends the civic and moral value of social programs, why they weren't just for "freeloading" by "the Negroes." He complained to our local civic association about their pressuring homeowners in the neighborhood not to sell to Black families. When he finally moved out of the house, he sold it to a Black couple.

Yet, it took police violence against white kids to break his heart. My father and his buddies, all those middle-aged men I knew who, in their late teens or early twenties, had waged the Second World War—Irv on a PT boat, Gene in a tank, Cousin Willie with the infantry landing at Normandy, my father in his B24, and others—they saw the campaign for Black rights as akin to their own. Akin to, but not *of*.

4. Becoming

I sensed that my father and his friends had always known what they were fighting *against* in WWII. But if they thought about what they were fighting *for*—and I'm not sure it was ever a conscious thought, perhaps just a kind of embodied drive—they would have said that they aimed to uphold something that was inchoately American. Hence my father's anguish at the police riot in the streets of Chicago in 1968. But also something still incomplete. This incompleteness of the American project distinguishes it from the fully fleshed-out process that makes Germany German, France French, or Hungary Hungarian, or can seem to. An Englishman might yearn for the "sceptered isle"; Americans have nothing to yearn for, so we must hope.

I've never seen the dialectical nature of hope that white Americans, including those WWII fighters whom I came to know, have so clearly as I do today, with marches for Black Lives Matter. It's never been so clear to so many white Americans that the double edge of the hope we harbor needs to be examined. We who have been admitted to the club of whiteness are free to wonder whether the political norms, cultural traditions, and economic verities of American life really do constitute progress toward a more justice society, and therefore grounds for hope—or if no republic and no set of mores can withstand the ruthless demolition of civilization by the historical engine of capitalism, and therefore that hope is beside the point. This dialectic is a luxury, however lugubrious the debate sometimes feels.

If hope is the residue of an inner sense that the American project is incomplete, then the failure to extend that project to Black Americans—the unwillingness of the Army to integrate until it was forced by Harry S. Truman; the persistence of Jim Crow in the South despite America's ostensible victory over tyranny in the war; the even longer persistence (to this day) of unequal opportunities for education, housing, and employment between Black and white Americans; and the mass

incarceration of Black men—has amounted to a refusal to include Black Americans as fully worthy of considering hope. That is, as fully American. To say that Black Lives Matter is, in this sense, to assert not merely the simple truth that the count of Black bodies slain by police ought not to exceed that of white or other bodies, but that the meaning of American life, which is supposed to be to question whether there are grounds for hope, has been denied systematically to Black Americans.

I think it was hard for my father and his liberal friends to see how to complete the American project. I think it was hard for them to acknowledge just how excluded Blacks were, and how systemic that exclusion was. They were young, for one thing. My father and many of his friends were highly educated by the time I got to know them in the '60s, but back when they had been in the armed forces during WWII, they were just out of high school. Most had never been outside of New York, let alone North America. They thought they wanted the best for everyone, but the “everyone” they knew were Jews who had struggled, Italian-Americans who had struggled, Greek-Americans who had struggled. People who were in the process of becoming white. That Black Americans were still struggling meant, I’m sure they believed, that things would eventually turn out well for Blacks, too, just as things had turned out well for their parents, their friends’ parents, and themselves.

To my father, that was the luck of being born in America: *things could work out*. You had to be on guard for hate, but the Constitution and the laws would spread justice. The system would work for Black Americans. (The truly unlucky, to liberals of my father’s crowd, were the ones born in Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and so forth: even those who hadn’t been extinguished by the Nazis were impoverished by the broken postwar economies, subjugated by authoritarian governments, sentenced to the Gulag for crimes they weren’t aware of, etc.

Theirs was the bad luck of birth.) Black Americans, to them, had been as lucky as they had. Their time would come. "Their," not "our."

There is also the naiveté. Not just of those boys fighting WWII who couldn't quite see that they were not fighting for *all* Americans, but the necessarily naïve illusion behind the whole American project. There is only one way to accept America as a work in progress: that the country is essentially ahistorical, that America has no historically constituted Truth, only the remnants of yesterday and a weird, often unsatisfying, and hotly debated vision of tomorrow. To include Black Americans means recognizing multiple visions of tomorrow, differently burdened by yesterday. To include all Americans is to act like a small child, making new friends at the beach or playground, naïve to differences of upbringing because of a focus on rebuilding the sand fortress or taking turns on the slide.

To my father, the world was populated by beings who are continuously *becoming*, never fully complete. Did this come from his experience in WWII? From observing the play of Fate, the universe's mocking of human self-importance, the seriousness of small children with too little to eat?

Beings who are always becoming. I haven't known war first-hand. I envisage it as an elemental state, a naked encounter with an unforgiving universe. If you are not becoming something, you are dead. If you are lucky, you are alive. Nobody gets to be who they aren't, but if they're lucky they get to keep becoming. You live your best life and the universe does what it will.

Is this why wars are always about children? Because children are always in the act of becoming and war separates becoming from being? I still wonder why my father, believer in Fate, spoke of children and not of death. Peppina, enigmatic child of war, what were you becoming in 1944? Did Fate, in the form

of war, deal you a favorable hand? If you had the luck to survive, then you would be 85 years old today, or thereabouts. What do you tell your grandchildren about the war, the American airmen you met, their naïveté, their hope? Knowing what you know, what are you becoming now?