

Home

Spring 2010

Winter 2010

Autumn 2009

Summer 2009

Spring 2009

Autumn 2008

Summer 2008

Spring/Summer
2008

Winter/Spring
2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

Professor Mandell and the Touch of Stone

by Allen Stein

David Mandell, Professor of History, had forgotten that he even had the piece of stone he found that afternoon at the bottom of his desk drawer. He was in his study, looking for some leather strips so he could re-string an old baseball mitt that he was passing on to his son. It was a beat-up thing, but Mandell's father had bought it for him and had even used it himself on a couple of occasions, and it pleased Mandell to think that now his own son would feel the satisfying smack of a ball in that glove. And there in a coil of leather in a back corner of the drawer he saw the stone, dark gray, jagged and chipped, somewhat smaller than the circle his thumb and forefinger might make, but large enough to evoke weighty memories.

The stone had been given him by his colleague Edgar Levy about five or six years before. Mandell had been in his office late one warm afternoon. The blinds were drawn, but a few slants of yellow light streaked his desktop, pointing up nicks and coffee-stain rings and, above them, drifting dust motes. Levy had returned, just days before, from a Fulbright in Poland. "Here, boychik," he'd said to Mandell that afternoon, "I want you to have this—from one member of our poor, diminished tribe to another. It's a piece of Auschwitz; I made a pilgrimage there."

And then he'd reached into his pocket and placed the stone on Mandell's desk. It sat there, half in shadow, half in faded sunlight, one of its edges just touching a coffee stain ring. "It's from a broken wall of the crematorium, Dave, a bit of sacred rubble that I liberated from the heap. I figured it would mean something to you."

Mandell had picked it up after a moment and was almost surprised that his fingers didn't feel a searing tingle. Then he'd recalled Hannah Arendt's thesis on the sheer banality of evil and realized that he really should have expected nothing but the touch of the stone, nothing but dreary everydayness.

Levy had watched expectantly. His field was Holocaust Studies, but Mandell had come to realize sadly (and with the faintest professional disapproval) it was more about witnessing than it was about scholarship. On the wall of Levy's office was the well-known photo of a dazed and haggard little Jewish boy, arms aloft, being marched off from his home at gunpoint by a German soldier in full battledress.

Mandell studied the piece of stone. His own career was of a very different sort from his colleague's. He was a specialist in nineteenth-century America, his particular interest the lesser-known presidents of the Antebellum period. His book on Franklin Pierce's presidency had argued that Pierce was not quite as inept as previous historians had written, but more a man badly constrained by circumstances. The slight attention and mixed notices Mandell's book had received hadn't discouraged him. He hadn't expected much more, given the topic, and the book had, as he'd hoped, won him tenure and an Associate Professorship. On the day Levy had given him the stone Mandell had been

looking forward to getting done with putting some grades on papers and turning back to his next scholarly project, a study arguing that James Buchanan had done about as much as any man in the White House could to stave off the conflict between North and South. Mandell was not expecting that this book would attract much notice either, but he was reasonably sure that it would get him promoted to Full Professor.

As he'd held the stone in his hand that afternoon in his office, he'd wondered just what on earth he'd do with it. He'd supposed it ought to be seen by someone, somewhere, but he couldn't imagine keeping it on his desk at school as a little paperweight or, perhaps, in some sort of small display case. It would be too grim a conversation piece with any unfortunate student who happened to ask about it and too constant a memento mori for Mandell himself. No, he'd realized, he no more wanted it there on his desk than he'd want, preserved in a tiny bottle for display, the fetus that he and his girlfriend back at college had aborted after he'd told her that the two of them had no future together. Nor did he want the stone at home—where, after all, would he put it—on a coffee table? in an honored spot on the mantel?

“I gave a larger piece to the rabbi,” Levy had said. “He’s going to put it in a memorial exhibit in the lobby of the temple. And, of course, I kept a chunk for myself and my family.”

“Of course,” Mandell had said, then had added, sincerely enough, after a pause, “I’m touched that you thought of me.”

“Well, Jewboy, there aren’t that many of us Yids here in these deep Southern groves of academe, so we homies have to look out for each other.” And Levy had chuckled and actually reached across the desk and patted Mandell’s head.

Mandell had chuckled with him and, though he'd always liked Levy, he'd felt now for the first time, really, an affection for him as a fellow Jew, the only other Jew in their rather sizable department. He'd surprised himself in this, for he'd long since chosen not to make much of Jewishness, either for himself or others, rarely mentioning his background, and had married outside the faith. He'd told himself vaguely that committing oneself to a particular faith was all well and good for people who felt they needed it and, of course, if it didn't make them clannish, but that, finally, trying to be a decent human being was all that really mattered.

But still there'd been that surprising surge of feeling for a fellow Jew as a fellow Jew. “The old ties are stronger than we know sometimes,” he'd acknowledged to himself, and he'd acknowledged as well the obvious potency for him of the stone, this gift that he'd still preferred not to accept.

“Thanks for entrusting it to me,” he'd said, as his colleague left. I'll find a proper place for it.” And later that afternoon, he'd put it in his briefcase along with a pile of papers and some notes for his book on Buchanan and gone home.

In the years that had passed since that afternoon, Levy had died of a rapidly virulent cancer, Mandell had completed his book on Buchanan, which, as he had expected, both attracted little notice and got him promoted to Full Professor, and the stone had rested, entirely forgotten after a time, in this catchall drawer in the desk of Mandell's study. Mandell took the stone in his fingers now, looked at it closely, tossed it a few inches in the air, caught it, and looked at it some more. He noticed now the old eyeglasses in his drawer, the two baby teeth of his son's that he'd put in there and forgotten years before, the lock of hair beside them from his

son's first trip to the barber, and they all seemed for the moment remnants of the mountains of ghastly plunder left behind at the death camps. Though he knew it was a troubling image, he was pleased nonetheless at his imaginative leap, told himself that he needed to try to bring a little more of his imagination to his writing, and then reminded himself, "you get too concerned with imagination and you run the risk of losing perspective and objectivity"—Levy's later works, Mandell believed, demonstrated all too obviously the dangers of just such a loss.

Mandell was about to put the stone back in the drawer and attend to re-stringing the glove, when his wife walked in.

"What's the stone, honey, some souvenir?"

"You could call it that, I guess," he said, and told her what it was.

"My God, when did you get it? How?"

"About five or six years ago, from Levy. Didn't I tell you about it then? I thought I had."

"No, silly, if you'd told me I'd have remembered."

"Well, I thought I had. I guess it slipped my mind. I was busy working on the Buchanan at the time. Sorry. Here, take a look at it."

"It's such a grim-looking thing," she said with a bit of a shiver as she studied it.

"It doesn't just look like something you'd find lying alongside any road?"

"I don't know. It gives off a nasty vibe, some kind of almost tactile darkness. I really think so."

He shrugged slightly. "That's only because you know what it is."

"Don't tell me you've had it in that drawer for all these years?"

He shrugged again. "Where should I have had it?"

"I don't know, but somewhere better than that. I can't believe you would just bury it away and forget it like that."

"Well, I guess I did., but I'm not sure the thing's worth dwelling on morbidly, you know."

She stared at him. "David, you are an historian. This is a piece of some pretty major history—that's all I'm saying—and it shouldn't be buried in a desk drawer, that's all." Sighing, she asked, "Have you ever shown it to Justin?"

"Nope. And he's probably too young to see it now."

"He's nearly ten, David. They've talked about Hitler at school, and the boy actually stops now sometimes for a minute or two at the History Channel when he's surfing. Show it to him. He needs to see it. He needs to feel something personal for all of his dead relatives. It's part of his heritage, David. You—we—owe

it to him.”

“All right,” Mandell said, “Okay, but if he starts having nightmares or is afraid to take a shower because he’s worried that poison gas is going to stream out instead of water, we’ll know what to thank for it.”

“Did that happen to you?” she asked him.

“No. My parents never made an issue of the Holocaust, though. They just said that I should be glad to be in America, where nothing like that would ever happen to us. So, obviously, I felt bad for everyone who’d suffered back in Europe and I grew up hating the Nazis, of course, but my dwelling on it wasn’t going to help anybody, was it?”

“Well, we won’t make an “issue” of it, either, and we won’t let him “dwell” on it, but I do think Justin should see this.”

So Mandell showed the stone to his son and let the boy hold it when he asked to. He was touched to see that his son handled the stone delicately as if afraid to squeeze it or let it fall

“Such marvelous innocence,” Mandell said to himself, “I hope he can keep that for a while.” And Mandell’s eyes filmed over when his son said, “Since I’m half-Christian, I just want you to know, Dad, that that part of me apologizes for what lots of Christians did to the Jews.” Mandell said, “Thanks, Justin, but you don’t have to apologize for anything. You’re a good kid. Just go on being one, that’s all.”

The boy smiled and patted Mandell’s shoulder.

And as weeks passed, Mandell was gratified that his son did not seem to be dwelling on the horrors of six decades before. A couple of questions from Justin on the first two or three days after seeing the stone seemed to be the extent of his involvement with the stone and the world it came from. The stone itself Mandell had now left on top of his desk in his study, and after a few days he barely noticed it anymore.

Then, less than two weeks before Easter, Justin came home from school saying “Miss Johnson asked if you could come and show the stone to the class and talk about how the Nazis killed millions of Jews. I told her about how you had it, and she said it would be very educational for everybody and help people be kinder to each other, and everything. So could you, Dad? She said a week from Thursday would be good since it’s parents’ day, and any parents who want to can come, and we’re gonna have extra P.E. and cake and ice cream to celebrate that and celebrate also because it’s last day before spring break.”

“Well,” Mandell said, calculating quickly how much time it all might take from his current project on John Tyler’s presidency, “what she wants me to talk about isn’t anything to celebrate, you know.”

“Yeah, she knows that, but still it’s educational, and that’s what we’re in school for, right?”

“Right,” Mandell answered less than enthusiastically, knowing he couldn’t use John Tyler as an excuse and that he really didn’t have any other, since his own

spring break would begin two days before his son's. "And Mom can't do it?" he asked hopelessly.

"Of course not," his son responded, half-suspecting that Mandell was merely kidding. "She's not Jewish, and she's also not a history professor. Besides, she's gonna be at that all-day conference she told us about."

"Oh yeah, but Holocaust Studies is not even my field, you know."

"That's okay. You know a lot about it anyway and you're very smart. The kids are gonna really be impressed."

"Right, I'm so very impressive," Mandell said, "but I'll do it. I guess it's my responsibility. Tell Mrs. Johnson it's okay, only I want an extra-big piece of cake, all right?"

So a week and a half later Mandell spoke to his son's fourth-grade class. Justin looked proud of him, the kids had listened more attentively than he'd ever imagined they would, almost as attentively as the dozen or so parents in the room, and children and parents all had regarded the stone solemnly as it had been passed around among them. Mandell guessed that at least a few in the room had never knowingly met a Jew.

Then they'd all gone to the cafeteria. Mandell was sitting with his son and two other boys and their fathers at a small round table. One of the fathers, a home builder, said "I enjoyed your talk, Professor."

Mandell said, "Thanks, and call me David."

"You people were sure lucky that America was willing to take you in, Dave."

Mandell thought about how few Jews fleeing Hitler America had in fact been willing to take in, but decided it wasn't worth bringing up. "All my grandparents came over early in the century, well before the Nazis."

"Well, you've all done well for yourselves. I think that's great, Dave." And he nodded toward the other father at the table, a supermarket manager. "Ain't that right, Wayne?"

"You bet. Can't say I've met many, but the only Jews I've known have been doin' all right and good folks too, far as I know. I got no complaints." And he smiled ingratiatingly at Mandell.

Mandell wondered if the two men expected him to thank them and if it would be rude not to. He gave them a hint of a smile and a slight nod.

After a moment, Wayne looked around a bit furtively and said, "Tell you the truth, I know it ain't what they call 'politically correct' to say so, but I wish all minorities did as good as you folks have. I mean the Mexicans, they're not really so bad to deal with most of the time, but the 'African Americans,'" he smirked at the term, "well, not all of 'em, of course—I mean there's ol' President Bar-rack Hussein Obama, right?—but they can be another story altogether. I can't tell you how many we've had to call the cops on for tryin' to walk out with rib roasts and t-bones tucked under their NBA jackets or them big old sweatshirts they like."

“And you think you can get ‘em to a job site on time an’ get an honest day’s work out of ‘em?” the builder asked. “Don’t count on it. But, like you say, Wayne, the Mexicans and those other Latinos, they ain’t all that bad most of the time.”

Mandell didn’t know what to say to any of this. He certainly didn’t care to get into a pointless argument with them, especially not in front of the children.

Justin suddenly spoke up. “Maybe they were just hungry.”

“Who?” the market manager asked.

“The guys that took the food from the store.”

The manager laughed. “Yeah, and maybe the ones I catch with bottles of malt liquor are just thirsty, right? Your name’s Justin, ain’t it?”

Justin nodded glumly.

“Well, Justin, it’s like this, and don’t get me wrong, many of them are real good folks, first-rate, just like your dad and you, you know, but lots of them, if they’d just get off the crack and off the welfare and get their heads on straight and go to work, well, then, maybe they could afford to buy what they wanted to eat and drink instead of trying to steal it. The liberal types are gonna tell you different and make it all complicated, but it just comes down to wantin’ to work hard and act responsible. Understand what I’m saying, Justin?”

Justin merely stared at him, while the other two boys stared at Justin.

“He’s right, son,” the builder told Justin.

“But I’m sure your dad’s told you all that, right?” the manager said.

Justin looked over at his father. Mandell had told him nothing of the sort, and his wife, who was an attorney for a public advocacy group, had told Justin at length of the special difficulties faced by the poor.

Both men were looking at Mandell now. He glanced at their boys, both a bit taller and broader than Justin, and he wondered how readily the two might be influenced to bully his son. He thought too of how disturbing it would be for Justin and himself if the two fathers chose not to hide their disdain should he disagree too strongly with what they took to be mere common sense. “I’m afraid I have to confess that I haven’t told Justin that—well, not in so many words, anyway. You see, race relations, economics, sociology, none of that’s my field and it’s a terribly complex situation. I’d have to say that there are all sorts of factors involved in keeping many African-Americans in poverty, but certainly you’re right in stressing that lack of self-control and of a sense of personal responsibility are among the key ones, as many African-American leaders themselves, like Bill Cosby, for example, are saying now. And, of course, they can all follow the example of President Obama, if they choose to.”

“Well now, maybe that’s the white half of ol’Bama making that example, you know, Prof.” And the manager chuckled, then turned to Justin and said with a broad smile, “But you see there, Justin, straight from your father, a college professor. And if you can’t believe a college professor who’s your own dad, who can you believe, right?” To the builder he added, “And, boy, he sure does talk like

one, too, don't he?" The builder nodded, and both men laughed.

Mandell saw his son watching him intently. The boy's eyes had gone moist and his lips were set tight. Mandell turned from him, hesitated for an instant, and then chuckled along with the other fathers.

Driving away from school not long afterward, Mandell looked over at Justin, sitting beside him. When they'd left the cafeteria, Justin had walked to the parking lot with a couple of his classmates, and he hadn't spoken since he'd gotten into the car. He was staring out his window now, chewing on a bit of leather string hanging from the end finger on the baseball glove that Mandell had repaired for him.

"That was a real nice catch you made during Phys Ed. today," Mandell said.

Still staring out the side window, Justin muttered, "It was all right."

"Your arm's really improving, too, you know."

The strand of leather still in his teeth, Justin mumbled "Maybe."

Mandell didn't speak again for three or four minutes, as Justin continued to stare out the window and chew on the glove. "You're not upset about anything, are you?" Mandell asked.

The boy didn't answer except for shrugging slightly.

"Look," Mandell said, trying not to sound irritated by his son now, "those two guys didn't mean anything, if that's what's bothering you."

Justin turned now and looked toward him, the glove still at his mouth.

Mandell went on. "Neither was all that educated, and they were just trying to make conversation, that's all. They weren't so awful, and they have a right to say what they think. Anyway, you've got to learn to live with all kinds of people, right? And it wasn't worth making an issue of, was it? After all, it was supposed to be a pleasant day. If you don't understand now, you will when you're older, okay?"

Justin merely shrugged again and turned back to the side window.

"Now don't be such a spoiled little damn prima donna, okay? Use your head, okay? Life doesn't always go just the way you might like it to. I don't know what you want from me, anyway."

For a few moments Mandell drove along in silence, the only sound in the car, Justin's snuffing as he fought back tears. Then Mandell spoke again. "Look, you know what? I think you could really use a new glove instead of that beat-up old thing you've been using. Instead of heading right home, let's go over to the mall and get you one so you'll be making even better catches than you made today." And not waiting for any response from his son, he turned in the direction of the shopping center.

Five minutes later, as he sat at in traffic at a road construction site just before the mall, Mandell saw a small pile of gravel near the curb. First glancing quickly over at Justin, who still sat quietly, staring out his window, Mandell reached into his pocket, took out the stone, and surreptitiously tossed it into the pile. Then he

drove on, anticipating his son's pleasure as he caught his first tosses with the new glove.

Allen Stein received his B.A. and M.A. in English at New York University and his Ph.D. from Duke University. He teaches American literature at North Carolina State University and has published books on Kate Chopin's short fiction, on marriage as presented in the works of the American Realists, and on 19th Century New York author Cornelius Mathews. He's also the author of more than 30 articles on American authors, among them Hawthorne, Melville, James, and Wharton. My short story "Ain't No Asylum Here" was published recently in *Aethlon*.

Copyright 2010, Mary Chen. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.