

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

*Dan Lynn Watt*

### **Marching on May Day 1948**

May Day, May 1st, is a rite of spring, celebrated for centuries in European countries with flowers, spring songs, crowning of a May Queen, dancing with ribbons around a maypole, beer drinking and so forth. In parts of the United States May Day is celebrated by people who go out at dawn to collect flowers and fill May Baskets to hang on the doors of their friends and neighbors.

The May Day celebrated by my family when I was growing up was very different. In 1899 the International Socialist Congress designated May Day as International Workers Day to commemorate the struggle for the Eight-Hour-Day. Over the years it has been marked by parades and protests designed to show the strength of labor unions and socialist and communist parties. In many countries May 1st is still the official Labor Day holiday. In Communist countries it became the occasion for massive displays of political and military strength.



Preparations began the night before when George<sup>1</sup> took his World War II Army Air Corps uniform out of the closet smelling of moth balls. I loved to see him in uniform with his air force wings and multi-colored overseas service ribbon pinned on the front and to run my fingers over his Tech Sergeant's stripes sewed onto the sleeve. Three stripes above and two below. I tried on his cloth hat – the kind that looks like a hat you make by folding a piece of paper. My head had grown enough that the hat almost fit.

May Day was a special holiday, just for Communists, socialists and union members. We marched on May Day because we wanted free speech, fair wages for everyone, an end to racial discrimination and especially, peace. My father told me that tens of thousands would be marching all across the United States to show our government that Americans wanted peace.

My father would be leading the parade, marching with the Lincoln Brigade<sup>2</sup> and World War II veterans. I was old enough to march with Margie as part of the Harlem/Upper West Side contingent. We were going to gather on 31<sup>st</sup> street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. We would march down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue to 17<sup>th</sup> Street, where we would turn east toward a big rally at Union Square.

I was so anxious to get to the parade that I made us leave early. We took the AA Local to 34th Street. There were men selling hot dogs, soda, ice cream, American flags and political buttons. Margie bought us each a large button from a man who had dozens of them stuck to a board hanging from his shoulders. Hers said "Union Maid." I picked "NO MORE WAR." They were a quarter each. "It's for a good cause," my mother said as she plucked the coins from her purse.

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1 Throughout my childhood I called my parents and grandfather by their first names, George, Margie and Maurice.

2 The Lincoln Brigade was the name chosen by American volunteers who fought on the anti-fascist side in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939, just prior to World War II. Most veterans of the Lincoln Brigade also fought in World War II.

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We had to wait an hour before we saw the first marchers. So much for insisting we come early! I asked Margie to buy me a hot dog with mustard and sauerkraut for 10 cents. She gave me two quarters and said, "Here, get whatever you want, but fifty cents is all you get. It has to last you all day."

The street was too crowded for me to run around. I pulled a pink rubber spalldeen from my pocket and started bouncing it. After a while I noticed a boy watching me. We played catch for a while, until his mother said they had to go or they'd be late and she pulled him off to where she was going to line up.



The first marchers coming down 8th Avenue were the Lincoln Brigade veterans, in their US Army uniforms. Margie and I pressed to the edge of the sidewalk. "That's my father!" I shouted to everyone around us as they swung into view with George and three other former officers out front carrying American and Spanish flags. I knew my father was a hero and the crowd lining 8th Avenue confirmed it. Hundreds, probably thousands of people were cheering their hearts out for him and the other vets.

May Day parades were not like other parades. There were no marching bands, no girls in cute red and yellow uniforms twirling batons, no fancy floats, giant balloons, fire engines or soldiers carrying guns. Instead, it was just thousands of people carrying signs and banners, singing and chanting. The banners told who they were. "United Electrical Workers Local 47 Teaneck New Jersey," or "ILGWU" (International Ladies Garment Workers Union). A few hundred high school and college students passed us with a banner that said "Labor Youth League." Margie leaned over and spoke into my ear, "You'll march with them when you're in high school."

Some banners told people's nationalities. "Italian Americans for Peace" were singing *Avanti Popolo, Avanti Popolo, Bandiera Rossa, Bandiera Rossa*. Margie told me they were singing the Italian Communist Party anthem. "Bandiera Rossa" meant "Red Flag." I didn't see a single red flag all day, only American flags, and sometimes flags from countries the marchers came from.

The marchers were all ages. I was happy to see quite a few children marching with the adults. Lots of people were carrying printed signs saying, "NO MORE WAR," "END JIM CROW," and "WIN WITH WALLACE." Every printed sign had a union label at the bottom. Many others carried hand-made signs like "Our Kids Want Peace," "Roll the Union On," or "Fare Increases are not Fair!"

Finally it was our turn to march. I picked up a sign that said "NO MORE WAR," just like my button. Margie and I took turns carrying it until our arms got tired and we passed it to someone else.

Marching down the middle of 8th Avenue with police blocking the side streets was even more thrilling than watching my father march. We marched at the front of the Harlem and Upper West Side sections of the Communist Party. People lining the streets cheered as we chanted "Jim Crow Must Go" and "One-Two-Three-Four, We Don't Want Another War! Five-Six-Seven-Eight, We Want Wallace in 48!" I chanted as loud as I could even though I didn't know who Wallace was. Later I learned that

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Henry Wallace was the Progressive Party candidate for President.

Loud cheers resounded as we approached each new crowd of bystanders. Sometimes we stopped for red lights, while traffic crossed the Avenue. Mostly we were waved on by traffic cops and marched past long lines of cross-town traffic honking impatiently.

As we turned the corner to march east on 17th Street, my father in his Army Air Corps uniform surprised us by jumping into line with Margie and me. I felt secure and confident holding both my parents' hands as we marched the last half mile to Union Square. As we chanted "We don't want another war," I felt proud to be part of something much bigger than myself. The cheering by the crowds lining narrow 17th Street echoed loudly between the tall buildings.

At Union Square the loud speaker blared "Now entering the Square, let's have a big cheer for Harlem, The Upper West Side, and City Councilman Benjamin J. Davis!" Ben Davis was a black man, one of two Communists who had been elected to the New York City Council. He had been marching in the center of our row, behind the Harlem banner. My father laughed as he told his friends, "Danny thought everyone was cheering for him. He didn't realize they were cheering Ben Davis who marched beside him." I was confused. Was he teasing me? I certainly enjoyed the cheers but I never thought they were cheering specially for me.

As I write decades later, I suspect it was George's bantering way of bragging to his friends that his 8 year old son had marched in his first May Day Parade with Ben Davis, a Communist celebrity.

There was a huge crowd at Union Square, getting larger and larger as more marchers arrived. I didn't listen to the speakers but I liked the songs. Pete Seeger sang about ending Jim Crow. He threw his head back, pounded his banjo and sang, Halleluyah I'm a-traveling, Halleluyah ain't it fine. Halleluyah I'm a-traveling, Down Freedom's main line.

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My grandfather Maurice always woke up before anyone else and made breakfast. He had already been to the newsstand and had the Sunday papers spread out across the linoleum surface of our kitchen table. I could smell coffee and hot cereal simmering in the double boiler, but Maurice hadn't set out any bowls. Every Sunday of my childhood our family read three morning Newspapers, The Times, The Herald Tribune, and The Worker.

"What's for breakfast?" I reached out for the comics in the Tribune.

"Look at this." Maurice gestured with his left hand toward the front page of The Times holding his cigarette in his right. "That's what they call fit to print."

"Left Outnumbered on May Day Here," I read aloud.

Apparently there had been two parades yesterday. While we marched down 8th Avenue with thousands of progressive New Yorkers, an anti-Communist Loyalty Day Parade was marching down 5th Avenue.

The Times had a lot to say about Loyalty Day, calling it "an affirmation

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of Americanism," while devoting only a few sentences to our parade. "The Loyalty Day paraders marched proudly but quietly." For them this was not just another parade. ... In every countenance one could read determination to accept the challenge of the rival marchers and hurl it back."

"They don't say anything about our parade," I complained.

"The capitalist papers always lie, always downplay our turnout." He paused and took a drag on his cigarette "They are trying to make us look weak. You have to read *The Worker* to get the truth."

"Big May Day March Does City Proud" was *The Worker's* headline. May Day marchers far outnumbered Loyalty Day paraders, the Worker said, explaining that the leading May Day marchers entered Union Square about 2:30 PM and that the last marchers didn't arrive until 5 hours later. "Loyalty Day was a pretty dull parade. There were no speeches. ... No one shouted slogans demanding lower rents, cheaper food or better wages. They don't go with anti-Communism."

"Can I please have some oatmeal?"

Maurice rose to get a bowl out of the cupboard as I reached for the comics again.



Life went back to normal. Walking to school with my best friend Curtis on Monday, I didn't mention marching in the parade. Somehow I knew that May Day would not interest Curtis or my classmates at PS 54. I did not mention May Day at "Current Events" that morning. Neither did anyone else.



I went to sleep-away camp in Connecticut that summer. At Camp Madison I learned to swim in Long Island Sound, and the proper ways to raise and lower an American flag, unfolding it and then folding it again so that it never touched the ground. I liked singing rounds, playing softball and playing Capture the Flag at dusk with the bigger kids.

No one mentioned politics at Camp Madison. But when I got home the political pot was boiling over. The papers were full of the story. While I had been having fun at camp, Federal authorities had arrested 12 leaders of the Communist Party, including my parents' friends Ben Davis, and Johnny Gates. They would be tried in Federal Court for conspiring "to overthrow the government by force and violence."

"What does that mean?" I asked Margie. "It means the government wants to stop Communists from telling people about socialism. It doesn't want Americans to know how much better life is for workers in Russia. It wants to shut us up."

I worried that my father might be arrested, but I didn't say anything. "Will Ben Davis and Johnny Gates go to jail?" I wondered aloud. Johnny Gates was editor of the *Daily Worker*. He had been in Spain with my father and had been to our house for dinner several times.

"I don't think so, Honey. At least I hope not. We have freedom of speech in this country. The First Amendment means we can say whatever

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we want. The government can't stop us from speaking. I'm sure this case will be thrown out of court. "

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The Wallace campaign was now in full swing. My mother had meetings one or two nights a week. Every weekend she went out campaigning, standing on street corners, smiling and handing out leaflets telling people why they should vote for Wallace. Sometimes I went with her. It wasn't as much fun as I thought it would be. A few people smiled and spoke to us and wished us "Good Luck." Many took the handouts without looking at us; some walked by scowling and refused to take one. Others would take them and throw them on the sidewalk.

The scowls made me uncomfortable. "Why don't those people like us?" I asked Margie. "They're scared Honey. They're afraid that if they take our leaflets people will call them Communists. I bet a lot of them will vote for Wallace on Election Day anyway." I wasn't so sure. I was glad that we were not in our own neighborhood, so my classmates wouldn't see me.

Between talk about the trial and the scowling people, I learned that many Americans were afraid of Communists. I couldn't understand what they were afraid of. I knew my parents believed in making a better world "with liberty and justice for all," just like the Pledge of Allegiance.

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When our fourth grade teacher Mrs. Brady asked us to raise our hands for Truman or for Dewey, I didn't raise my hand either time. I was usually eager to raise my hand. I wanted to raise my hand and say "How many are for Wallace?" but I didn't. I thought I saw Mrs. Brady looking at me, but she didn't say anything.

One day a classmate named Stephen came over to me at recess.

"I know who you are," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You're a Communist."

I felt my body tighten, my breath come a little quicker. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I saw your mother going to a meeting in my building. They're Communists. She's a Communist. I know."

"I don't know what you are talking about," I repeated lamely and walked away.

How did Stephen know my mother? Was somebody watching Margie? Was somebody watching me? I felt ashamed because I knew he was right. My mother was a Communist, and so was I. A braver boy, I thought, would have stood up for my mother and what we believed in. I was sure my father would not have been afraid when he was a boy.

It took several days for my anxiety to dissipate. Would Stephen tell other kids? If he did would they beat me up? Would Mrs. Brady make me sit by myself?

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We had no school on Election Day. PS 54 was one of the places people went to vote. I went right into the voting booth with my mother, and pulled the levers for her. I pulled the lever on Row D, American Labor Party. Rows A, B and C were for the Democratic, Republican and Liberal parties. Wallace got a million votes, which I thought was great, but Truman won the election. We didn't like Truman. We thought he was preparing for war and making people sign loyalty oaths. We thought he was a little better than Dewey, but not much.

1948 was the year I began to identify strongly with my parents' views. From May Day on, I started feeling that I was a Communist too. I cared about World Peace, about racial equality, civil rights, civil liberties and workers rights.

The enthusiasm and sense of promise I felt on May Day were still very much with me at year's end. The disappointing ending to the Wallace campaign, the arrests of Party leaders, these seemed like concerns for grownups, not for me. But I could not escape what was happening in the world around us. The Cold War was heating up and Anti-Communism had become official United States policy. Radio and newspaper reports about the Berlin Airlift made it clear to me that most Americans did not share my family's love for the Soviet Union.

Our country was becoming uncomfortable for Communists. I had no idea how uncomfortable it would become.