

## Introduction

**T**he last conversation I had with my father, we argued. That was not unusual, since we had argued for almost as long as I can remember. He liked to argue, and so did I. But since we now saw each other only once or twice a year, we had learned to argue with one another without getting angry.

I was thirty-seven then and he was sixty-eight. In my late teens and through most of my twenties, we couldn't argue without fighting, without getting bitterly angry at each other in ways that made it impossible to talk at all for a while. In fact, in order to get along during those years, we tried as much as possible to avoid "touchy" subjects, which at times seemed to include just about everything. But he had retired twelve years earlier, after nearly thirty-nine years as a steelworker. After he had retired, he was less tense and less subject to the bursts of temper I had grown up with. And, at some point, I no longer had to prove to myself that I had a mind of my own.

But in our last conversation, I got angry. And though I had said much more bitter and hateful things to him in earlier years, I was surprised to hear myself harangue him in such a bitter tone. We were arguing about President Reagan, for whom he had voted. He had been explaining how Social Security was in trouble because the government had allowed "the welfare cheaters" (who he portrayed as if they were an organized group) to dissipate the Social Security funds. It was not the first time we had discussed this subject, so we

both knew the limits to which we could go, and we observed those limits scrupulously. Still, I was frustrated with the conversation.

What I liked to talk with him about were his years in the mill, particularly the 1930s. He had been a shop-floor organizer as a young man, which means that he was one of the thousands who solicited his fellow workers to sign cards indicating their desire to be represented in a labor union by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Then as now, you could be fired for such activity, and in a steel town then it was an act of bravery to “talk union,” not only in the mill, but anywhere in town. One of my favorite stories was about my father signing up my Uncle Stan. Stan’s signature had to be kept secret from my Aunt Ruth, who found out about it only after the first contract with U.S. Steel had been won. She then refused to talk to my dad, her younger brother, for some months. In Ruth’s view, Dad and Stan had jeopardized her family’s livelihood.

My father always argued from experience—his own and that of people he knew and trusted. He didn’t believe anything in the newspaper or on television unless it fit with his experience. He had lived in one town—a western Pennsylvania company mill town—all his life, and since most of the news and public issues presented in the media were difficult to fit into his experience, most of his ideas about the world outside were pretty screwed up, in my view. But about the mill and the union, and about anything that was part of his direct experience, he was a shrewd and perceptive observer, and what he had to say was always worth hearing. He had been a griever for the union, an early opponent of Steelworker president David J. McDonald and later an opponent of I. W. Abel, after Abel unseated McDonald as president. He eventually quit being a griever because he felt the union “wouldn’t let me represent the men.” He could tell a good story, and I had heard most of the best ones more than once. The more I read of twentieth century labor history (something I had never been taught in school), the more I valued his stories and opinions. On labor issues we generally agreed, or at least didn’t violently disagree, and that’s what I preferred to talk about.

But he liked to talk with me about politics, which is what, in one way or another, we had always argued about. He had been a lifelong Republican, but that didn’t say much (directly) about his politics. He had voted for Roosevelt three times (he had been too young to vote in 1932) and had been active in the grassroots labor campaign for Truman in 1948. After that, he always voted “for the man, not the party,” as he said, and

being a Republican was less a reflection of his political views than it was a way a Protestant German family differentiated itself from the Catholics and “foreigners” in the local Democratic machine. His father had been a Republican in the Progressive Era and had experienced what my grandfather saw as the “treachery of Woodrow Wilson” during and after the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Thus Dad and Ruth were Republicans. But religious and ethnic differences shaped his politics more than party labels. He voted against John Kennedy in 1960 because he genuinely feared that the “infallible pope” would be running the country. And in 1968 he was one of those who couldn’t decide between Gene McCarthy and George Wallace, tending toward Wallace more because of his Protestantism than his racism. But for as long as I can remember, my father always supported strikers in any labor dispute—whether they were women school teachers, Chicano farmworkers, or black sanitation workers in Memphis.

He always argued from experience and acknowledged no other basis for knowledge or opinion. Thus, in our last conversation he was recounting various stories about “welfare cheaters” he had witnessed or been told about. It was when he added this one from his own observation that I blew up: “These [coal] miners, kids a lot of them, all spring [1981] on strike. They drive up in brand new pick-up trucks and pay for their groceries with food stamps. They’re on strike and they get food stamps! Reagan changed that.”

“Shame on you,” I exploded, sounding like an angry father. “I don’t know whether the miners have a legitimate beef or not, but *they* think they’re fighting to preserve their union. Where would we be today without the Mine Workers? What would your life have been like without the miners’ union? And now that you’re well off, you want to see them starved off a strike! Shame on you.”

After I’d had my say, I gulped. I didn’t want a big fight. I didn’t get to see him that often, and I didn’t want to ruin our day together. But I had insulted him, and he was not one to overlook that. Ordinarily, he would have come back at me with some choice words about the deficiencies of the college-educated.

Instead, he looked away from me with a puzzled expression. He said nothing, and I started fumbling to take back the tone of what I’d said without giving up the substance. He seemed calm, not agitated, but more than a little sad and humiliated. Some seconds passed and he said, “Let’s get some coffee,” and he got up to go to the kitchen. He was con-

fused, not angry—which surprised me. “You’re right about the miners’ union,” he said, as I followed him to the kitchen. “We owe them, you and me.” And then he returned to his argument about the role of the welfare cheaters in undermining our society.

“THE MINERS’ union.” It’s a phrase that goes way back in my memory. The debt my father and I acknowledged had to do with the formation of the CIO and with the United Mine Workers (UMW) having devoted money and staff to organizing the steelworkers in the 1930s. My father had witnessed it, had been a part of it, and in my early years he spoke of “the miners’ union” with the same reverence and gratitude that he usually reserved for God. There was a story my father told that I can’t remember any of the details of, but I remember the feeling and the lesson. Somehow, in one of the Steelworkers’ fights, “we” looked up and there were the miners, “hundreds of them” marching arm-in-arm in support of the steelworkers—like the cavalry arriving. It’s one of those things a father tells his son with such genuine emotion that, though the details of the story fade, the point of it remains: The miner’s union begat the Steelworkers union, and the Steelworkers’ union begat all that was good in our lives.

By 1981, when our last argument happened, my father himself had forgotten that sense of genealogy and obligation he had instilled in me. That, I concluded later, was what puzzled him. He was a stubborn, overly proud, “I-don’t-take-shit-from-nobody” kind of man who rarely conceded an argument, especially with me. But when I reminded him of a truth that had been central to his life and outlook, he not only had to concede, but he was genuinely and sadly perplexed about how he had, temporarily, forgotten it. After my anger subsided, so was I.

By 1981 I had a ten-year-old son of my own. After a few years of consciously trying to raise him differently than I had been raised, I found myself reverting to my father’s ways. At first when my wife would say “You’re just like your father,” or “That’s just what your father would say [or do],” it hurt and humbled me, because we were agreed that he was a negative model for our lives. But as time passed, I came to see that he had had his virtues, and before he died I let him know that. I hadn’t realized how hard it was to be a good man and a good father, and I came to conclude that, all things considered, he had been both.

He didn’t drink, for example, so my sister and I didn’t have to deal with all the problems that children of alcoholics have to confront, as my

wife and so many of our friends have had to do. Though he was an authoritarian patriarch who eventually made my mother's life nearly intolerable, he never abused any of us, and as my mother, my sister and I gradually freed ourselves from his grip, he had enough grace to let us go without much rancor and animosity. He was not anything like a distant father, one of those who are never around enough or say enough to make much difference, except by their absence, in their children's lives. Rather, most of our problems with him had to do with his being too involved in our lives, his taking too much responsibility for us.

As a mid-level skilled steelworker in the glory days of the U.S. economy, he was a good breadwinner for our family, and he brought a self-discipline and dedication to that role that gave it dignity. He was a deeply religious man, a fundamentalist evangelical with a strong (and sometimes weird) sense of both social and spiritual obligation. Though he was an irritating, dominating, and ultimately unlikable man, he demanded, and usually got, genuine respect from those who knew him. Above all, he was somebody who thought things through, and though highly arrogant and irritating in communicating his views, he was sincere and capable of genuine communication. Though nobody was less like the carpenter from Nazareth in his daily manner and style, for example, you could always get him to rethink his view of things if you could aptly refer to the way Jesus would have seen or done something.

Johnny Metzgar was a formidable person—intelligent, shrewd, and indomitable. But he was not ambitious. In fact, he distrusted ambition even as he insisted that his children have it. Though he virtually herded my sister and me into the professional middle class, he had what I have come to view as a classic working-class philosophy of life and a considerable ability to communicate it, reason about it, and argue for it. This book is an attempt to articulate part of that philosophy, the conditions out of which it grew and the institutions—the family, the church, the federal government, and above all the union—that sustained it. It is not a philosophy for all time, nor is it one that I, as a middle-class professional, can fully endorse. But it is a way of looking at things and of living a life that has a depth, complexity, and integrity to it that is easy for the professional, middle-class observer to overlook or distort. It is also a philosophy of life that has a lot to offer the achievement-oriented middle class—as an antidote, if nothing else, to our own worst tendencies.

My father was not a typical worker or even a typical steelworker; there is no such thing. The American working class is and always has

been considerably more diverse than the middle class—in fact, so bewilderingly diverse that middle-class professionals routinely resort to the crudest of stereotypes, including the myth of classlessness, to shield themselves from its complexity. But neither was he unique or extraordinary in any meaningful sense. He fits many of the stereotypes of the white male blue-collar worker of his time—a sort of Joe Six-Pack without the six-pack. He fits even more easily into a certain working-class social type, what Richard Feldman and Michael Betzold, in their excellent typology of 1980s autoworkers, call “union advocates”—except that he had no ambitions to advance in the union or to take on additional responsibilities beyond his own work area.<sup>1</sup> As a griever, he was a shop-floor leader responsible for knowing what was going on in the industry, the union, and national and Pennsylvania politics (up to a point, of course), but he occupied the lowest position in the union, above which you could no longer be a regular guy.

Johnny Metzgar was a regular guy. What’s more, he believed heart and soul in being a regular guy, and he could explain it and argue for it better than anybody I’ve ever known. That’s what I hope will make him a good point of entry into understanding working-class culture during a time when it was less limited, less inhibited, less hemmed in by other classes, than at any other time in our history.

How COULD such a regular-guy union advocate forget the debt we owed the miner’s union? It’s understandable that my sister and I would forget, or that the generation of steelworkers who followed my father into the mill would forget. It wasn’t part of our direct experience. But my father entered the employ of the U.S. Steel Corporation fresh out of high school in 1930, and he worked, very irregularly, without a union for seven terrible years as a molder’s helper. As a child he had seen his own family and many others decimated by industrial accidents—and still scores of others ground down over time into drunkenness and demoralization. After the union firmly established itself throughout the steel industry in 1941, he saw nothing but improvements—over time, dramatic improvements—in every aspect of his life. He retired at the age of fifty-six and lived comfortably on a Steelworker’s pension, with Steelworkers’ health insurance, even spending the winter months in Florida! No regular guy in the history of the world had seen the material conditions of his life improve more dramatically. And he *knew* that it had not just happened, as if by magic. He knew it had had to be fought

for, that people had died for it and suffered for it, and, most of all, endured for it. How could *he* forget?

What we remember and what we forget is complexly determined not just by our own personal history, but by what our larger culture emphasizes, focuses on, and tells stories about. When I was a child, Johnny Metzgar was one of those who would not let anybody forget “what we all owe the union.” But it gradually faded from his mind because nothing in the broader culture reinforced it, and much in the broader culture made it difficult to retain.

It’s not just that the broader culture has become anti-union, though in many basic ways it has. It’s more fundamentally that our national culture, and therefore our national memory, is shaped by the professional middle class. And the professional middle class is generally not interested in other classes, often not even aware that there are other classes, unless those classes become problems. When they’re seen as problems, as the African-American “underclass” has been for the past three decades, then the middle class debates whether they are more sinned against or sinning. Liberals see them as victims and conservatives as perpetrators, but the debate is fundamentally shaped by a “social problem” paradigm.

The industrial working class was once one of these problems, and as long as workers could be easily viewed as victims in a social problem paradigm, they got the attention, and the support, of the liberal middle class. But once workers became empowered through their unions and were therefore no longer credible victims, the liberal middle class lost interest and left the conservative middle class free to portray them as perpetrators. Industrial workers like my father saw the larger (middle-class) culture shift from seeing them as victims to seeing them as one of us, and then to seeing them as the principal perpetrators of racism, sexism, and narrow-mindedness in American society. Who could remember that unions had once been more than a white male plot to keep blacks in their place? Who could remember that the labor movement, as a social movement that made a difference, laid some of the groundwork for the Civil Rights, community organizing, and women’s movements? People must be either victims or perpetrators, and neither of these categories appealed to my father, nor to very many others in the working classes I have known, black or white, male or female. Though I never heard him use such a phrase, like many others of his kind he eventually took a “fuck ’em” attitude—none of this had anything to do

with him, and he figured there was no use trying to explain who he was and what he was about to people who insisted on such a constricted set of categories and judgments.

Unfortunately for him, the time was passing when you could ignore the larger national culture and fully preserve and live within your own ethnic, religious, class, neighborhood, or even family subculture. Through the ubiquitous television and other forms of mass media and the explosion of educational opportunities, among other things, the period of my father's maturity was precisely the period when the professional middle class established its cultural hegemony. Postwar America was a middle-class society not because of anything having to do with income levels or home ownership, but because—though an oligarchy of wealth would continue to rule, and though for a time the working class would have real economic and political power—the professional middle class would determine what was right and what was wrong, what would be emphasized and what forgotten, whose stories would be told and whose ignored. By 1981 the national middle-class culture could reach right into your memory, even while you were trying to make sense of things on your own, and only a professional middle-class son could help you remember what had been basic to your way of looking at things.

THIS BOOK is about class in postwar America, part of an attempt to understand two broad class cultures as I have experienced them in the second half of the twentieth century. I'm one of those who "got out" of the working class during that time and became a full-fledged middle-class professional, a university professor. My wife of more than thirty years is another one; she's a highly paid accountant who grew up in what was for the most part a single-parent welfare family. After the last of seven children entered school, her mother was a department store clerk earning just above the minimum wage.

Neither of us has been able to enthusiastically embrace the professional middle-class way of life. We *have* embraced it, but it took us a long time, and we didn't get over our ambivalence and confusion until we had mistakenly passed it on to our son. Though we wanted the income and working conditions of the professional middle class, we didn't want to let go of the working-class way of looking at and being in the world. Because of our shared ambivalence, we were acutely conscious of the two class cultures—she because of her strong ties to her family of origin, and I because of my jobs and intellectual and political interests. For the past quarter century, I have taught working adults at



an urban commuter university in downtown Chicago, spending some of those years as a labor educator. Though my father's generation was the last in my family to be steelworkers, my brothers-in-law and nephews from my wife's side are well represented in what's left of the mills. Most of our friends either come from similar backgrounds or—because of their jobs as teachers, labor professionals, or organizers of one sort or another—have lots of contact with and appreciation for working-class people and their ways. None of this was intentional, or at least not entirely. It just sort of happened that way. Middle-class professionals whose entire lives and experience have been within the professional middle class do not find us interesting, and we find them not quite “down to earth” enough for us.

There is an implicit theory of classes here, but it is a simple theory, with only a few classes, and it is based on the broad vernacular's way of understanding class in America. Sociologists concerned with status differentials and economists concerned with incomes and occupations find dozens of “classes” that are significant to understanding our society.<sup>2</sup> But politicians, journalists, and other middle-class professionals who are not engaged in sustained scholarly analysis generally think in terms of a three-class model: rich, poor, and middle class. In this schema, there are only a handful of rich people and a larger handful of poor ones, while the vast majority is called middle class. Though this schema would seem to be based simply on income, when we discuss the dividing lines it usually becomes clear that all kinds of moral and status judgments are involved as well. In general the middle class is good, if perhaps a little boring, and the rich and poor are suspect.

This broad, everyday theory of social class shapes the way we experience our society's problems and prospects, and the generally positive valuation of the so-called middle class is an important part of our democratic ethos. But it makes people like my father nearly invisible, and it makes my own and many others' life experiences incomprehensible. A four-class model, one that is sometimes found among sociologists and historians, accommodates these realities while retaining some of the basic simplicity of the rich-poor-middle-class schema. It simply divides the middle class into two parts—the working class and the professional middle class. The vernacular often recognizes this difference, and while the three-class model is overwhelmingly predominant, everyday conversation often slides back and forth between three and four-class models. Though most middle-class professionals are uncomfortable with the term working class, they'll use “blue collar” or “factory workers,”

“clerical workers,” “working people,” or even “ordinary people” (not to mention “rednecks” and “hardhats”) in ways that only make sense within a four-class model.

None of this is very precise, but I think an objective basis exists for distinguishing between the professional middle class and the working class, one that is roughly captured in the basic labor-force composition categories of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Like all other workers, “managerial and professional workers” (who now constitute about one-quarter of the workforce) work for a wage—and would be considered proletarians in Marx’s basic class schema. But unlike the rest of the labor force, though we too have bosses, we have substantially more control over all aspects of our labor process—including exactly when we’ll work and when we won’t, in what order we’ll do the tasks we’ve been assigned, and most importantly how we’ll get the job done. As in all human realities, there are lots of exceptions across a continuum, but the basic expectation is that, as managerial and professional workers, we do not need day-to-day supervision, whereas the rest of the workforce does. We usually have college educations and are paid “salaries” rather than “wages,” and our annual income is usually substantially higher. But the most important difference between us and the working class is the amount of discretion we have in what we do day in and day out—including all the skills, attitudes, qualities, and characteristics that go with exercising that discretion.

That’s the basic theory of classes that informs this work, and there are elements of it that I’m not too happy with. Push it hard, try to make it precise and rigid so that it easily decides all difficult cases, and it will fall apart. But of a few things I’m certain: first, that you cannot *not* have some theory of classes that informs the way you think about the society in which you live; second, that the predominant three-class model hides and disguises a huge part of our social reality—nothing less than the American working class; and finally, that steelworkers and professors, department store clerks and accountants are not difficult cases. The two categories in the middle class are in fact different classes of people, with different ways of doing, seeing, valuing, and being. They know it. We know it. The mystery is how they can be so often absent from our conception of our society and its history.

THIS BOOK is an attempt to remember the golden age of the American working class and to account for why it has been virtually forgotten. My thesis is not that there has been some kind of professional

middle-class plot. Rather, I want to explore how what we remember, and how we remember it, is shaped by our values and goals, our senses of who we are and where we're going—that is, by our interest in whatever future we're striving for.

My father's insistence in the 1950s on remembering what we all owed the union, for example, was related to his hopes for what the union had still to do and his fears of losing what had already been gained. In later years, as both his hopes and his fears diminished (largely because most of the hopes had been realized), so did his memory. Likewise, some of the memories recalled in this book were not available, or not valuable, to me until triggered by some event or activity that made them relevant to my goals and my sense of the future. In broad terms, until the 1980s I took unions and the larger New Deal framework in which they thrived for granted; as a New Left radical, I scorned "the liberal consensus" and its half-hearted ameliorations of the capitalist system. From the mid-1960s I was frustrated with my father's lack of class consciousness and the inherent limits of his vivid trade-union consciousness. Now, when so much of what I took for granted has been lost and more is endangered, I feel and remember differently.

The strategy of this book is to take one highly visible event of which my family was a part, the 1959 Steel Strike; to place it in its historical, institutional, and familial context; and then to do some speculating about the implications of remembering or forgetting this event. I have chosen to focus on the 1950s for a complex of personal and intellectually strategic reasons. The '50s was a time when the working-class sense of possibility was large, and there was a unity and coherence to working-class life then that there is not today. But the 1950s also has an important symbolic role in the middle-class imagination and national memory—as an era peculiarly middle class in its ethos, a time of affluence and repression, prosperity and intolerance, consumerism and family values. Important policy debates and battles in our current "culture wars" are cast in terms of their stance for or against the '50s. The 1950s that both sides remember in these contests is a time in which the 1959 Steel Strike could not have occurred. The 1950s, as remembered in the middle-class imagination today, does not include labor unions, which are what created the "golden age" I want remembered.

On a personal level, the 1950s were my formative years, and my memories of them are more vivid and less filtered through the various interpretive lenses adults develop; they were also the last time I was a part of the working class and knew only its world. My choice of the

1959 Steel Strike as a focal point is, therefore, not innocent. It was an absolutely crucial strike during a perilous time for unions, it was the largest strike in U.S. history (as measured in “man days idled”), and no published work has yet dealt with it in depth; but if I had grown up in an autoworker’s or electrical worker’s family in the 1950s, I would have chosen a different event.

Looking at postwar U.S. history from the vantage point of the 1959 Steel Strike, however, offers a lot of advantages. It establishes that there was a working class then, and that at least a part of it was politically and economically powerful. The strike, which was the last of six massive, nationwide steel strikes, was a showdown between labor and management in an industry central to both the American labor movement and the American economy at the time. It centered on an issue—union work rules—that is essential to American unionism, but particularly difficult for middle-class professionals to understand or sympathize with. And the attitudes and characteristics necessary to winning that strike reflect crucial aspects of American working-class culture, a culture that is by no means as dead in our current reality as it is in middle-class imaginations.

The design of this book, then, allows for a great deal of what is often called subjectivity, and I do not apologize for that. In fact, a rigorous and responsible cultural relativism demands that we abandon the notion that we can have the point of view of God—standing outside our society and observing it—and requires instead that we attempt to place ourselves within the society and history we seek to understand. The undisciplined arbitrariness that most people reject in denigrating “subjectivity” cannot be overcome simply by pretending that we are not a part of the picture. In fact, as I hope to show, such pretending leads to the disappearance of cultures unlike our own, distorts our self-understanding, and tends to make our professional, middle-class cultural hegemony either oppressive or irrelevant for most people in our society.



## THE 1959 STEEL STRIKE

### Prologue

I have almost no memory of the 1959 Steel Strike, during which my father, as well as my Uncle Bill and Uncle Stan and about one of three households in my neighborhood, went without a paycheck for 116 days. I was fifteen when it started and was driving my father's car by the time it ended. It isn't that I don't have clear memories of those days. Like most people, I can remember the year I turned sixteen more vividly than almost any other. I just don't remember much about an event that should have been pretty memorable.

I remember my father cackling sometime before the strike began, "I'll be on strike then. Oh, it's going to be a long one." He was looking forward to it, and I remember him laughing in that too-loud, taunting, irritating way he had when he knew he was outside the bounds of common feeling. It was both phony-sounding and a bit menacing, like the voice of the villain in a cartoon. He hated the steel companies and, on more than one occasion, chanted something like, "We're going to teach them a lesson they'll never forget." He was also looking forward to having some time off and had planned an elaborate, back-country fishing trip to Canada for during the strike.

I think I remember this incident, unlike so many others, because it initiated in me a complex of responses to my father. On the one hand, that taunting laugh when other people were fearful embarrassed me, because he was both showing off and being mean. On the other hand, I liked his independent, con-

trarian spirit—it kept things lively at family gatherings—and I knew well that his hatred for the companies and his love of the union were anything but phony.

I remember my mother complaining during the strike about him being around the house so much and being in such a good mood all the time. Though gregarious in public settings, at home he was often sullen and stern and didn't want to be talked to. When working, he was in a bad mood a lot of the time, and he had a bad temper that could flash at you at any moment, no matter what mood he was in. My mother, my sister, and I had learned how to maneuver around those bad moods and temper flashes. His being in a good mood was both irritating and unnerving.

I remember too, when it must have been late into the strike, him preaching to me about this fellow who had not prepared properly for the strike and was now complaining about the union's not getting it over with. "I told him it would be a long one, that he shouldn't buy that car, that he should hunker down and get ready," I remember him telling me. "But some people can't see beyond the nose on their face." He liked to pop off at other people to me, and I liked to listen to him do it. He made it dramatic, and there was always a moral to it, something specifically for my benefit. "Remember that," he would say. "If you don't look ahead, if you don't plan, if you don't figure what *you're* going to do, then *they'll* live your life for you, and you won't even get a say in it."

This "they" didn't refer just to the steel companies and their treacherous foremen (of whom I heard plenty). It also went for used car salesmen, wives and families, the preacher at church, or anybody, including the union, who tried to control you by means other than rational persuasion. My father even railed against the president of the steelworkers' union, of which he was a member. "And who does he think 'the union' is anyway—David J. McDonald? Not in your life. McDonald would just as soon kiss their [management's] butts on a golf course somewhere. But we're the union, all of *us* are the union."

That's it. That's all I remember of the 1959 Steel Strike. Though that year, that time in my life, is full of vivid memories (instances when I can remember how hot or cold it was, what something or someone smelled like, where I was and how I felt, in a flash of precise detail) that is all I remember of what was a definitive event in the life of my family.

For, indeed, my father had been right. In 1959 the Steelworkers taught the companies a lesson they never forgot. And though the 1959 strike was not the most important turning point in our lives, it was the culminat-

ing event of two decades of labor struggles that established a freedom and dignity for me and my family that, if you think about it, is pretty awesome.

The problem is that almost nobody thinks about it. I'm not the only one who doesn't remember the 1959 Steel Strike very well. Almost every history of the 1950s gives considerable attention to the fact that Charles Van Doren cheated on a TV quiz show. Van Doren finally 'fessed up to his sins during the 1959 Steel Strike, and that jolt to American innocence is well remembered. Conversely, the steel strikes of 1949, 1952, 1955, 1956, and 1959 are of no significance in American history. Of eighteen histories of the 1950s, only seven even mention that they or any other strikes occurred.

Some people, especially those concerned with the labor movement and those with a special interest in the steel industry, remember these events. But the memories are not good ones. Tom Geoghegan, a labor lawyer and author of the best-selling *Which Side Are You On? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its Back*, remembers: "It was a long, bitter strike . . . and at the end of it the men had gotten nothing. It was like a family scandal. Something the older men didn't talk about, as if they had once tried to strike and had flopped at it."<sup>1</sup> John Strohmeier, a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper reporter and steel-town editor, on the other hand, remembers the 1959 Steel Strike as one of the causes of the decline of the West: "The union won all it had hoped for . . . [but] while the outcome of the strike was good for labor . . . it was devastating for the industry . . . [T]he forces set in motion by the 1959 strike were soon to overwhelm the steel industry."<sup>2</sup>

Memory is a strange and mysterious thing. As Alessandro Portelli has vividly shown, it is as revealing in what it forgets and distorts as in what it most accurately remembers. An oral historian of working-class life in Italy and America, Portelli has taken a special interest in mistaken memories: "'[W]rong' tales . . . allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them. . . . The discrepancy between fact and memory . . . is not caused by faulty recollections . . . but [is] actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general."<sup>3</sup>

My interest is to tell the story of the days when unions were strong in American life, when workers in major industries banded together to get a say in their lives. My dreams and desires are centered around making it so again. Remembering one strike in its historical context may help others remember how powerful, how transcendent, unions used to be,

and how carefully and responsibly the industrial working class used that power for a time. To remember may be to rekindle, for—to twist Santayana’s famous maxim—those who cannot remember history will not be able to repeat it.

I am thankful to Geoghegan and Strohmeier for at least remembering. But Geoghegan represents a leftish point of view common among labor and social historians that hesitates to see what unions accomplished *after* they became stable and bureaucratic institutions. There were no violent confrontations in 1959, few colorful rallies or pageants, and certainly no noble if hapless victims of capitalist society—just a very civilized, grind-’em-out, wait-’em-out strike by a very powerful group of men. Likewise, Strohmeier represents a plague-on-both-your-houses “community” point of view: The greedy Steelworkers, aided by a weak-kneed and complacent management, did themselves, the industry, and their communities in. The unions became too powerful, and they killed the goose that laid our golden eggs.

Of these two remembrances, I prefer Strohmeier’s, not just because it is more accurate (the Steelworkers did not “flop” at striking in the 1950s), but because it recognizes the Steelworkers as a causal force in the history of the United States. I like that remembrance better because it allows that we were there and had an impact, even if I can’t remember it, and even if Strohmeier’s assessment is terribly one-sided and wrong. What follows, then, is my story of the 1959 Steel Strike—and of my and other people’s memory, and lack of memory, of it.

Five years after the strike, grown up and married, I remember leaving Johnstown, Pennsylvania, the grimy, semirural steel town in which I grew up, for New York City. I remember saying to people as I left, in a softer version of that smirking way my father had when he was outside the bounds of common feeling, that I wanted to go where history was happening. It was a genuine feeling, and I’m glad I got out of there when I did. But I regret that I didn’t know then that history had happened in Johnstown and that my family and I had been a part of it.