



WILLIAM GROPPER, "ROT FRONT" (THE NEW MASSES, 1933)

LETTERS

FREEDOM'S UNKNOWNNS

TO THE EDITOR:

Nelson Mandela was released recently after twenty-seven years of punishment for his beliefs. With luck he may be able to lead the Union of South Africa into the community of civilized nations.

In recent weeks world media and politicians have celebrated Vaclav Havel, playwright and recent political prisoner become president of Czechoslovakia. Earlier this winter the world mourned the death of Andrei Sakharov, Soviet physicist and dissident; he lately emerged from exile to spend the twilight of his life shaping the moral consensus that is today remaking the USSR. Last autumn Lech Walesa, Polish electrician and labor leader recently restored to legitimacy in his homeland, addressed the U.S. Congress.

What do these men have in common?

They are heroes. And throughout history millions of women and men who have shown some share of this heroism have been murdered in droves for their courage, for their difference, for their resistance to the brutal will of totalitarian forces of left and right.

Some few, like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., have left blazing traces of their passage. But most have been bludgeoned and blasted into silence by the uniformed thugs of totalitarian governments and private terrorist groups like the KKK.

Seventy years ago in this Land of Liberty, Joe Hill and hundreds of Knights of Labor and Wobblies and AFL-CIO unionists were murdered and beaten by American fascists.

Also in the 1920s and '30s, Josef Stalin's secret police brutalized and butchered perhaps ten million Soviet citizens including 1.5 million kulaks, farmers whose crime was simply that their sound and successful farming practices undercut Stalin's arguments for collectivization. In the 1930s and '40s, Adolf Hitler massacred 6.5 million Jews and gypsies and Jehovah's Witnesses who failed to flee his evil.

Today, in 1990, all around our planet ethnic and religious minorities continue to be jailed and tortured by armed majorities whose authority consists solely of firepower. Deng Xiaoping murdered thousands of Chinese students last year simply for disagreeing publicly. George Bush sent American officials to shake his bloody, palsied hand.

Millions of thoughtful, stern and brave men and women throughout history have confronted the armed might of enfranchised terrorists, the Ceasescus and Stalins and Bothas and Nixons and Dengs. They have died.

Mandela and Havel and Walesa have not yet been murdered. Thanks to the media of the late 20th century, their ideas and their examples and their courage are showing us the way to a new era.

But we must never forget that for every hero who survives to inspire and delight us, more than a million heroes have quietly died for their beliefs.

They continue to suffer and die today.

RALPH M. WIRFS, ASTORIA

MY CAT

My cat's name was Snowflake until he was shot and killed. Snowflake was the most gentle, most unassuming, friendliest, and least troublesome cat in the world before he was shot dead. He was, like Winnie-the-Pooh, a cat of very little brain but with his pure white fur and pale blue eyes he was a very pretty cat who kept himself scrupulously clean. Snowflake spent most of his almost five years in front of our house "patrolling" and greeting passersby and neighbors, which is probably what got him killed. He was too visible. Snowflake had few "tricks," but one of his most engaging was his habit of quietly waiting in our bedroom until I got up to go downstairs to make the coffee. When I started for the stairs he would start down, but when I told him to wait until I got my shoes on he would dutifully wait half-way down the stair until I started down. He would prance in front of me to the kitchen to gaze into my face with his blue eyes saying, "See, the dish is empty." When he got his scoop of dry cat food (none of our cats will touch canned food) he would eat a few bites and then go to the front door to stretch himself up the door jamb (which was his other trick) to announce he was ready to go out where he would spend most of the day. Snowflake never meowed like other cats. He would very, very occasionally emit a sort of squeak, but that was it. He would purr easily but you could not hear it unless you put your ear on his neck or fingers under his throat. Snowflake never went into other people's houses or bothered other people's animals, so there was simply no reason for anyone to have any animosity toward him. Presumably someone riding around in a pickup with his rifle had to shoot something and there was white Snowflake sitting on the sidewalk. My cat is sorely missed in my household. We raised him from a tiny ball of fluff and nursed him through his minor sicknesses and loved him inordinately. I sincerely hope that whoever shot Snowflake will burn in hell. . . . and soon.

— DAVID BENNETT

David Bennett lives in Astoria.

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