



The truth about Bono Weiner

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The first day of winter and Rocky and I mark this change of seasons at the end of the St Kilda pier, sitting together near the rocks behind the kiosk, both of us looking out across the fog-covered still grey water of the bay, out to the shadowy container ship on the horizon. Rocky is curious to ascertain just what it is that I am pointing out to him, there in the distance, unmoving, as if frozen in place by the becalmed water. There is a small fairy penguin colony there just beyond the pier's end, nestled into the rocks, but no penguin this winter morning has ventured out of the nests.

It is a cold morning but I had resolved to stay with shorts and a t-shirt, in part out of vanity, for I believe that for those who have come to know us around St Kilda and Elwood, this uniform, worn no matter what the weather, is a sign of my individuality if not a mild and affecting eccentricity. There is also Rocky. At the South Melbourne market last Saturday, I again checked out the little dog coats hanging in the stands in front of the pet supplies stall where each week, I purchase the supply of liver treats and green bone shaped biscuits that are Rocky's favorite treats, though he will never eat one while I am away. He saves it for my return and greets me at the front door with it in his mouth.

The little coats, some with legs, some without, are all fur-lined. I particularly liked the black one, made I think of slightly shiny water-proof synthetic material. It had red furry lining and I thought Rocky would look rather smart in it, not to mention that were I to succumb to temptation and buy it, he would be wearing Essendon Football Club colours these winter days during the football season, with Essendon, near half way through the season, despite predictions that they would finish near bottom, still a chance to play in the finals come September. I would of course have been tempted to buy him the black coat with the red fur lining even had Essendon performed at about the level of the collective expectations of the football pundits, but with hope still unexpectedly alive, the temptation was that little bit harder to resist.

I resisted and settled for a few extra green bone -shaped biscuits. Again, vanity played its part in this decision, for I imagined how we would look along the St Kilda beach board walk or on Acland Street, me grey-haired, my hair long and unruly most mornings, and dressed in some sort of leisure suit or at least track pants and matching top –for I could not remain committed to shorts and a t-shirt if Rocky was dressed for winter– walking with a small furry dog in a black and red shiny coat and I thought that this was a look I did not seek to cultivate, not yet anyway.

So it was that we set out this first morning of winter, me in shorts and t-short, Rocky coatless, for the pier and from there, sitting looking out across the bay, to witness the first winter sunrise. The grass in the park beside the white-washed lighthouse was dew-covered and slippery in the darkness as we made our way to the water's edge. I wondered, as I looked at the yellow light illuminating the little lighthouse, whether it was really true that the local council had plans to build skating complex on the parkland, there in front of the lighthouse and I thought that if such a plan existed—that was the rumour in the neighborhood– it would confirm for me, again, that our time in St Kilda might soon be up, for I cannot countenance any more of this destruction of memories, my memories.

This does not mean that my memories are unadorned with fantasy or a writer's wishful thinking. This morning an email arrived from Chava's daughter. It was a warm email and Chava's daughter told me how much she had enjoyed reading my story about Bono Weiner and her mother, the woman, I had written, he loved and whom he had known in Lodz before the war and in the Lodz Ghetto. It was, she said, a wonderful story. I had written about Bono Weiner after going to Dick Pratt's funeral and I had written about how Bono had been a mentor to me and I had tried, briefly, to capture something about

his truly extraordinary life. I wrote about how Bono, when he was released from Auschwitz, went back to Lodz to re-establish the *Bund*, the Jewish socialist movement that before the war, had represented hundreds of thousands of Jewish workers and had fostered a network of secular, Yiddish-based schools and cultural organisations that transformed the lives of the Jewish working classes in Eastern Europe and parts of Russia.

My father had been a member of the *Bund* and my two eldest sisters had gone to *Bund* schools in Lodz before the outbreak of war. My father, who was a weaver, a working man all his life, apprenticed at 13 and with no high school education, used to say that it was the *Bund* that educated him and that because of the *Bund*, the Jewish working class in Poland and Eastern Europe, was the most educated, the best read, the most thoughtful—and therefore hopeful, the hope for a better world grounded in knowledge and serious thought—of any working class group in the world.

Bono had been a leader of *Tzukunft*, the *Bund's* youth organisation and after the war, despite the fact that its membership had been almost totally wiped out, murdered, in the Nazi's attempted genocide of the Jews, Bono, as he often explained to me over whiskeys late into the night, was determined not to grant the Nazis a victory by conceding that the *Bund* had succumbed to Hitler's plan for the Jews. It was a quixotic sort of determination, for where would the membership come from for this post-Holocaust *Bund*? So it proved to be and though Bono and a group of supporters managed to run a *Tzukunft* summer camp, for camp survivors and those who had survived by escaping to Russia – what a summer camp that must have been, in August 1946, two weeks together, a couple of hundred men and women in their twenties who had survived the Holocaust, many of them having lost their families – there were to be no others. No *Bund* or *Tzukunft* would ever exist again in Poland.

Bono gave up. He left Poland and from a displaced persons camp in Germany, he signed up for a year on the Snowy Mountain Scheme, the biggest building project in Australian history, designed to use the water of the Snowy River and its tributaries for the generation of hydro-electricity. Given that he had no relatives in Australia to sponsor him, signing up to work on the Snowy scheme was the only way Bono could get a refugee visa for Australia.

I met him first when I was seven, in the early 50s, when my parents, despite my pleas to be allowed to stay with them at the nearby guest house where they had, as far as I can remember, their only real holiday, sent me to a *SKIF* camp at Dromana, back then, a sleepy bay-side village with a hilly bush hinterland about 60 kilometres from Melbourne. *SKIF* was the children's group of the *Bund*. We slept in old army tents, the two hundred or so children and when it rained—as it did quite often back in the 1950s—the tents leaked and the old iron beds sank deeper and deeper into the mud with every passing day. . Most of our parents were *Bundists*, Holocaust survivors who came to Australia in the late 1940s. Within a couple years, they had established the *Bund* in Melbourne and Bono was one of the leaders and a *macher* – a player– in the Labor Party, where for a couple of years he was a leading light in the Party's immigration task force.

I do not remember much about that summer camp except that I was miserable. I do remember the morning ceremony on the *appelplatz* – there is no direct translation of this German word but it means meeting place where roll call is taken – when we stood in a large circle around a flagpole on which hung a blue flag with a red falcon in the centre of it, the falcon, we were told, there because it flies into the wind which we too wanted to do, that is fly into the headwind of history. We sang the morning song, the first line of which was *Der morgn roynt untkegen ven koym di zun dersheint* – the morning dawns red before us as the sun starts to rise – and which ends with *mir tzveyflen nit mir vartn nit, veil mir di yunge gvardye fun proletariat, veil mir di yunge gvardye fun proletariat!* – we don't hesitate and we won't wait for we are the youngsters of the proletariat, we are the youngsters of the proletariat – while one of us, chosen for reasons I could never discern, for I was never so chosen, raised the flag to the top of the mast.

The other memory I have of those two weeks is of Bono, tall and powerfully built, talking at a rate of knots, in Yiddish mostly, so fast that I could hardly understand a word, but enthralled nevertheless by his vitality and charisma. I think he spoke at our Holocaust commemoration ceremony about his experiences in the Lodz Ghetto where he was part of the underground resistance, such as it was, for the Lodz Ghetto was more sealed off from the outside world than any other ghetto in Poland. I do not think he spoke of his time at Auschwitz. Indeed, he never spoke to me much of Auschwitz, not during those many years when we drank together and talked together, not so much about the past, but about the present and the future and what that future could be if democratic socialism triumphed. In Australia mainly but elsewhere too.

Back then, Bono was building his travel business which eventually became Australia's largest travel agency, though he never talked about the business and when asked, he would say that there was nothing much to talk about and then he would quickly move on to politics or books or the need to build Yiddish schools in Australia, like the schools the *Bund* had built and run in Poland. He was always full of energy and vitality, emphatic and passionate in his

views, but able somehow to leave room for doubt and later, when my views on many things were not views he shared, he never once reacted with ridicule.

I wonder now whether it was back then, at that summer camp when I was seven years old, that I first heard that Bono had gone back to Lodz after the war to re-build the *Bund*? Was it then that I heard how he had stayed in Poland even as Chava, the young woman he loved and whom he had known in Lodz before the war and in the Lodz Ghetto, had gone to Canada and settled in Montreal? How she had married and had children, while in Australia, Bono remained single, perhaps waiting for Chava to...what?

Bono died 14 years ago so I cannot ask him about this. I do know that at some stage, Bono told me that he was waiting for someone. I always assumed it was Chava. I do know that later, when Chava came to Australia in the late 60s, Bono was clearly enamoured of her and that a few years later, when her marriage ended, Bono and Chava were together, mostly in Montreal, together until Bono died. Bono sold his travel business partly to be with Chava Rosenfarb. I know that he thought her to be one of the greatest modern Yiddish writers. He loved her with the sort of energy and vitality and charisma that I had seen in him more than half a century ago and that I had subsequently experienced every time he came over to drink with me.

What a story was this story of Bono Weiner and Chava Rosenfarb.

Then this morning came the email from Chava's daughter. She had read my story of Bono and Chava and had considered it beautiful but not exactly accurate. According to her, Chava and Bono, in pre-war Lodz knew each other but were not a couple. Bono was five years older and according to Chava's daughter, would have had no interest in her mother. Chava was in love with a boy who she would later marry. They were childhood sweethearts and had been liberated together from the Bergen-Belsen Concentration camp and had fled together to Belgium and from there, had migrated to Canada. He had gone on to become a doctor and later, a leading abortion rights campaigner in Montreal. By the early 70s, their marriage was over and it was then that Bono and Chava got together.

What am I to make of this? For half a century, I believed that Chava had been Bono's first love and that he had given up his chance to be with her because he was determined to re-establish the *Bund* in Poland, to deny Hitler a total victory over the Jews. Now Chava's daughter has a different story. Chava was not Bono's first love. He was in love with another woman and this woman had left Bono in Lodz after the war and had eventually migrated to Canada. What am I to make of this? Chava's daughter lived with Bono and Chava in Montreal when Bono was spending six months of the year there. Did they speak of these things? Of this woman who broke his heart who was not Chava?

Bono never spoke of this woman, not to me nor to anyone I know who knew him. I do remember those times when he told me that he was waiting for someone. Did I just assume it was Chava he was waiting for? At these times, we drank whiskey, sometimes a lot of whiskey and it is possible too that I heard what I wanted to hear or that Bono told me what he thought was appropriate to tell a young man like me. I think that whatever the truth may be. I do believe Bono told me that he was waiting for Chava and that this was not just the whiskey talking.

So it was this morning, the first morning of winter, as Rocky and I sat on the pier and looked out to the ghostly container ship on the horizon, the fog turning light grey as the sun rose, that I thought about the plan to build a skating complex on the grassy park beside the beautiful little St Kilda lighthouse and about how with the passing of time, the physical markers of memory – houses and grassy parks and old wooden piers and the Edwardian timber salt-water bath house on the St Kilda foreshore – are destroyed.

I wished, as I sat with Rocky, Rocky increasingly restless to get going, given that I could not give him a good reason to sit there staring out across the fog-covered water, that Bono was still alive and that I could call him and invite him to come over for a drink.