

AGAINST THE CURRENT

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*To my mother, who struggled to understand and help my father
during his times of mental suffering and stood by him
through thick and thin.*

*To my father, who lived a life rich and full,
who persisted in seeing the good in people.*

Deborah Ranniger, PhD
AGAINST The
CURRENT

**A Conscientious Objector During World War II
and the Daughter He Inspired**



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Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter One: Inspiration and Awakening	3
Chapter Two: Life in the Logging Camp	17
Chapter Three: Work of National Importance	29
Chapter Four: Action	37
Chapter Five: The National Mental Health Foundation.....	43
Chapter Six: Fair Housing – Not Yet	51
Chapter Seven: Brokens	61
Chapter Eight: Full Circle	69
Postscript	81
<i>Appendixes:</i>	
<i>A</i>	85
<i>B</i>	91
<i>C</i>	93
<i>D</i>	107
<i>E</i>	111
<i>F</i>	115
<i>References</i>	123
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	127
<i>About the Author</i>	129

AGAINST THE CURRENT

Prologue

EACH YEAR IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST, the salmon return home in the late fall. They swim thousands of miles from the ocean, swimming upstream through rivers and streams. Hurling themselves over rocks and rapids, leaping up the man-made fish ladders to circumvent dams, wiggling through pipes under roads, or sometimes bounding across storm-flooded roads; they return at last to the creeks of their origin. Their purpose? To spawn and die at home, leaving their eggs to pass along all that they have learned through their DNA history. They leave their carcasses filled with nutrients, to feed and nourish the next generation. Equipped with knowledge and nutrition, the newly hatched generation will make its way back to the ocean in the early spring, to repeat the cycle of life.

Much like the salmon, my father left his legacy, his knowledge, and his mark on me.

This is a memoir, the story of my father, of me, of our lives intertwined, like creeks and streams of experience braiding together to become a great river. Influenced at a young age to live a life of peace and work for social justice, my father served as a conscientious objector in World War II. One of only 3,000 men in the country working in state mental hospitals and with a few other men, helped to spearhead and establish the National Mental Health Foundation. As a Jewish man, he took bold risks, went against the will of his

AGAINST THE CURRENT

family and community, yet made a significant and lasting impact toward raising awareness in this country about mental illness; while sometimes struggling with mental illness of his own, though never diagnosed. Much later, in the sixties, he fought hard to end redlining in the Bay Area of California and promote fair housing laws, almost losing his real estate brokerage license. Yet he persisted, and I grew up learning first-hand the importance of standing by your beliefs, fighting for social justice, and working hard for a better world, to right past wrongs, despite obstacles, setbacks, or hardships.

Paralleling my father, my strength grew from him, a small distributary branching off in new directions, from our many shared experiences and those he thrust upon me. My passions and interests flowed in their own unique course though never diverging from the overarching quest to make this a better world for all, not just some.

Chapter One

Inspiration and Awakening

IT IS QUITE POSSIBLY THE hottest night of the year and the hottest time of day, when the baking hot bricks of this apartment begin to cast their heat inward, radiating all the heat amassed during the day, yet, I have chosen this time, or perhaps this time has chosen me, to begin to try to make sense of the fragments and threads of my father's stories. Perhaps the very intense heat has rekindled the emotional heat contained within my father, his experience, and my own intense drive to share this story. How did the little creeks and streams of our lives intertwine to become one large river?

I have been aware of my father's writings and stories for quite some time. In his later years he became obsessed with recounting his time serving as a conscientious objector in World War II and the inspiration and motivation behind it, the friendship he developed at the 1929 World Boy Scouts Jamboree. He started putting together his memoir when I was in my early forties, over twenty years ago. He kept many news articles, photographs, memorabilia, a tattered

AGAINST THE CURRENT

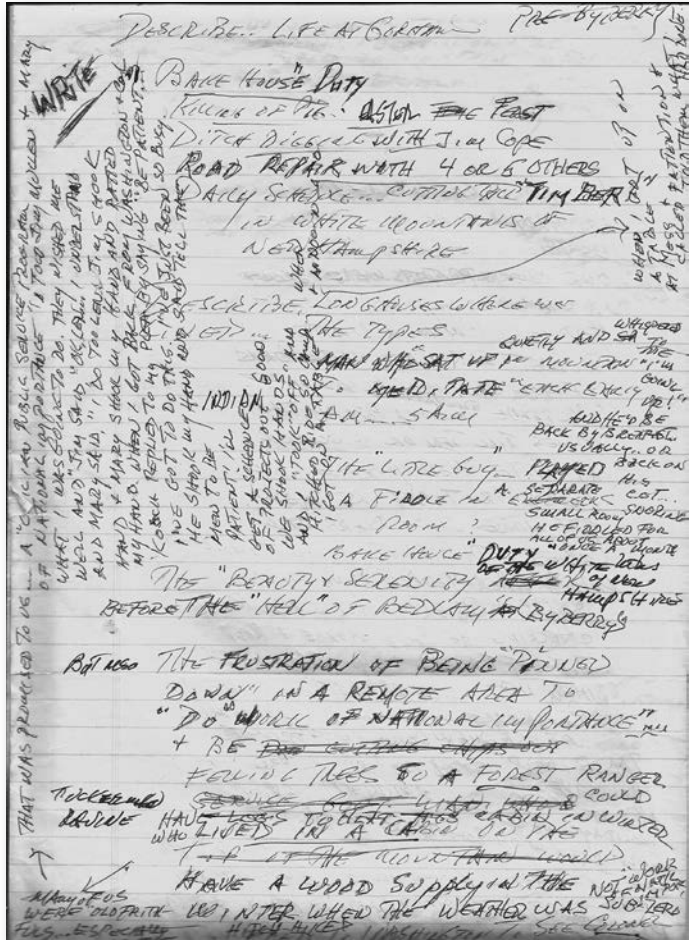
banner from his boy scout days, resumes and his own hand-written accounts of his experiences from his twenties as well as letters written home, all stuffed into a large box.

Yellow: The legal writing pads my father used to write his stories

Then he started anew, re-writing, adding on, filling in and adding new stories from intervening years. Much of this work was hand-written, scratched out, written over, written above, below, in the margins and on the sides and backs of the paper. He preferred to use yellow legal pads. Then my mom intervened. She pulled out the old manual typewriter and for a time he pecked away at that. Then she bought an electric typewriter, but he wouldn't use it. So, she took over. She managed to decipher and type up a few of the stories of his experiences but finally gave up and put it all in an even larger box. In addition to all this, there were two books included in the stack: Marvin Weisbord's *Some Form of Peace*¹ and Alex Sareyan's *The Turning Point*.² Both books told the story of the conscientious objectors during World War II and throughout time, from different perspectives. My dad was quoted and referenced in both books. But these were not my father's whole story, nor were they my story. My father crossed out, wrote in the margins, added scads of sticky notes, exclamation points and other commentary, as though he planned to write his own version, in his voice. By the time I inherited this voluminous stack of material my father had passed, and my mother was declining. She'd long since given up trying to make sense of it all. "Here," she said, "maybe you can do something with all this."

1. Weisbord, M. (1968).

2. Sareyan, A. (1994).



Sample of my father's writing on one of his yellow, legal writing pads

Just two months after my mother gave me this material she passed, and within the year, my husband of thirty-two years passed as well. It was 2015. I set the stack of documents in the closet and forgot about it, consumed with grief and a changed life. Until now. I had lost so much in such a short time. But this felt both timeless and

AGAINST THE CURRENT

timely. It was time to write. Initially, I set out to simply transcribe my father's words, to share his story, letting his voice be heard. Throughout this memoir, his voice and writings are shown in *Italics*.

As I progressed, I quickly realized that this was more. My father always noted how similar we were. My mother claimed the opposite. But where did the truth lie? Flashbacks and memories soared through my head as I read his words, my own experiences taking on new light. This was our story; a complex intertwining of our lives which shed light on my own quest for understanding and desire to make a difference.

Yellow: The color of the Star of David that Jews were required to wear in German-occupied areas during WWII.

Jews across Europe were fleeing from Hitler or just disappeared. Rumors filtering to the United States, spreading like wildfire throughout the Jewish communities spoke of atrocities being committed by the Hitler's Nazis. Those that remained were required to wear yellow Stars of David on their coats. The Jews were in danger, once again. They'd fled Egypt after centuries of enslavement, chronicled in the Old Testament, the book of Exodus. They'd fled Spain in the 1400s, Russia in the 1800s. My father's family fled from the Russian pogroms of the late 1800s, my grandfather finding kinship with the other Jewish merchants and peddlers in the 15th Ward of Syracuse, NY³ who also had fled the violence and massacres. They began their life in the United States as pushcart merchants, selling goods off their carts in the Jewish neighborhoods. They saved what they could and worked hard to educate their children, my grandfather and other family members eventually becoming optometrists.

3. Onondaga Historical Association (2014).

My family tree expresses these origins, and our traditions retell the stories annually. Now, it was happening again. In 1939, Germany invaded Poland, near my father's family homeland. By the time the United States entered the war in 1941 the war had spread across Europe and Japan had attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor.

The bugles called the men to action, but I couldn't take the steps to join them. We had entered World War II and I received my orders from the draft board. I was determined that I would never go to war.

One Sunday morning he announced to his family that he couldn't go to war:

I will not kill my fellow man and sow the seeds for another war. I will register as a conscientious objector. Shocked and dismayed, my father broke the uncomfortable silence that had descended upon the room, shouting angrily: "If you don't go to War, then I will do it for you!" "Dad, you're too old," I replied, "they'd never take you." Silence descended again.

In the 15th Ward, everyone knew everybody. And Everybody talked, like the very gossipy ladies depicted as busybody hens through the lyrics, the actresses and the musical by Meredith Wilson, *The Music Man*:⁴ "Pick a little, talk a little, pick a little, talk a little, cheep cheep cheep, talk a lot, pick a little more." Word in the family and in the community traveled fast.

4. Wilson, M. *The Music Man* (1962).

AGAINST THE CURRENT

My Aunt Jesse said: “Len, if you dedicate yourself as an objector, you’ll NEVER be able to find a job, make a living, or get married. You are committing economic suicide!” But my Aunt Roz had given a different opinion: Len, you are a leader, don’t you worry. You’ll get through this all right; just let me know if you need anything.”

Yellow: My grandfather called him a golden boy. Then he called him a coward.

My father had been known as “the golden boy,” bound for important things, a super achiever. His parents had sacrificed to give him opportunities. When in his teens, he had considered becoming a Rabbi. Deeply spiritual, a natural leader and desiring a life of scholarship, teaching, and helping others; he thought this was the path for him. He’d become a Scoutmaster at eighteen and director of the nearby scout camp at twenty-one. He’d been on the debate team in college, graduated from and received honors at Harvard University, the top oratorical prize; and he made the dean’s list. However, after his stance on the war, the reaction of friends, relatives, and his community, he gave up on that idea and all but abandoned organized religion, or at least the practice of being part of a congregation and engaging in weekly community worship. But he never abandoned his faith or his deep-seated values and morals which grew from his religious experience. It was quite a fall from grace. But why? Why would he risk everything and make such a bold decision?

Yellow: Like the iconic happy face, youthful and optimistic.

It is the spring of 1929, just months before the start of the Great Depression, yet for a twelve-year-old-boy, a time of great hope and excitement.

Deborah Ranniger, PhD

My parents called me into the living room where my father always read the daily paper. They sat together, and my father spoke, “Your mother and I have been reading an article in the newspaper. There is going to be a World Jamboree of Scouting this summer in England. Boy scouts, 50,000 of them, will come from fifty-two countries, put up tents and cots on Arrowe Park, near Birkenhead. You will meet with scouts from all over the world, exchange souvenirs and get to know each other through many activities, parades, and events. Would you like to go?” “Yes!” I shouted, I was so excited.

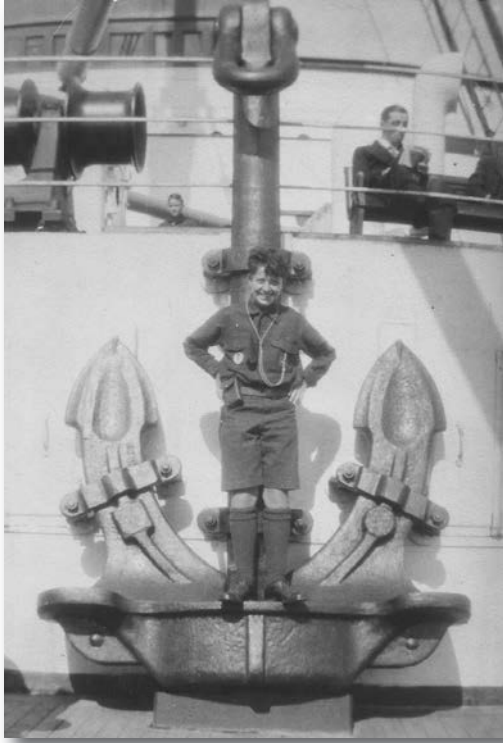
Over the next few weeks my father and his parents/my grandparents made preparations, sending in the application, purchasing the special clothes needed; special knee length wool shorts and belt with loops to hold a pocketknife and a coil of rope, shirts, khaki knee socks and a special hat. The boy’s shirts contained two front pockets, with the jamboree insignia sewn on the chest. Around their necks they were to wear their boy scout scarf and lanyard with whistle. They had a cool weather and a warm weather outfit.

That summer of 1929, my father left on the S.S *Duchess of York* to Europe to participate in



Syracuse boys “Dressed up for World Jamboree,” Left to right: Walter Blundred, Nathaniel Geddis, and Leonard Edelstein.

AGAINST THE CURRENT



Leonard Edelstein on Canadian Pacific Steamship *Duchess of York* to England
(*Personal collection*)

the International Boy Scout Jamboree. It was early August. On the first day of the event, he met Kiyoshi, another young scout:

“I am from Kyoto, Japan,” Kiyoshi smiled and gave me his hand. I told him I was from Syracuse, in the state of New York. Kiyoshi had studied English and spoke it well.

My father and Kiyoshi became fast friends. Each day they’d pal around, touring the thousands of campsites, tromping through the rain-

soaked muddy campgrounds, meeting the other scouts, and collecting as many pins, postcards, and pictures as they could from countries around the world. Despite sleety grey skies, daily drenching, and constant mud, they set about to meet and broaden their circle of world-wide friends. Each day wasn't complete without the iconic British fish and chips.



Campgrounds, Birkenhead, England, 1929 (*Personal collection*)

Every afternoon there was a gigantic parade. Thousands of us marched in colorful Jamboree uniforms in front of an audience of 50,000 folks from England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany and more. We saluted the Prince of Wales, Duke of Connaught, Lord Baden Powell (founder of scouting), a little girl named Elizabeth⁵ and other dignitaries from all over the world.

At the end of the two weeks there was one last massive gathering where all the scouts joined together into a gigantic wheel, holding

5. The future Queen Elizabeth was three years old at the time of the World Jamboree.

AGAINST THE CURRENT



Catch that Cadence: The Syracuse Scouts marching in Syracuse, shortly before departing for the Jamboree, 1929

hands. It was called the wheel of peace and brotherhood. At the end of the jamboree, Lord Baden Powell urged the assembled scouts to live a life of peace and goodwill.⁶

Then, the bugles sounded, the crowd quieted and we recited the Boy Scout Oath in unison. Tears were in our eyes. Kiyoshi and I stood together, in the mud, under a cloudy sky, then he turned to me; "Leonard, all good things come to an end, but we will write, we will stay together with our letters."

6. ScoutWiki Network, Golden Arrow and Wheel of Peace.



When the Prince of Wales reviewed Boy Scouts from all over the world at the Jamboree at Birkenhead, England, Syracuse scouts were in the front row to salute him. The Prince is shown here with Sir Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, at the left.



Top: The Prince of Wales and Sir Robert Baden-Powell reviewing Boy Scouts, Birkenhead, England, 1929

Bottom: Boy Scout flag, ca. 1929

AGAINST THE CURRENT

My father became an Eagle Scout and finished high school.⁷ He went off to college to Syracuse University and then to Harvard, getting his degree in law. He and Kiyoshi continued to exchange letters up until the outbreak of World War II. Japan was now the enemy, and they could no longer write letters. They lost touch.

Yellow Peril: A derogatory racial slur gaining popularity in the United States during the late 1800s, against Asian immigrants, particularly the Chinese, working on the railroads going to the West, and extended to the Japanese during WWII.

It was this powerful experience of meeting and developing a deep bond with Kiyoshi, which began my father's trajectory of peace and conscientious objection when World War II broke out. When the draft notice arrived my father immediately reacted:

Would I stick a bayonet into the body of Kiyoshi? NO! I would rather rot in jail! At the age of twelve the pattern of the future was set in my mind and heart. I had an experience that set the mental and spiritual basis to become "a man of peace" for the rest of my life. I am a Pacifist. That was it...very simple. And my parents never talked about it again, at least not in front of me. But I knew. I had failed them. I had failed the community.

My father took the cans of ashes from their coal stove to the street curb for Monday's pick-up. He felt good, his decision felt right. He would fill out the necessary paperwork.

Their home was small and modest, and I imagine that they could not afford steam heating, with radiators in each room, Instead, they

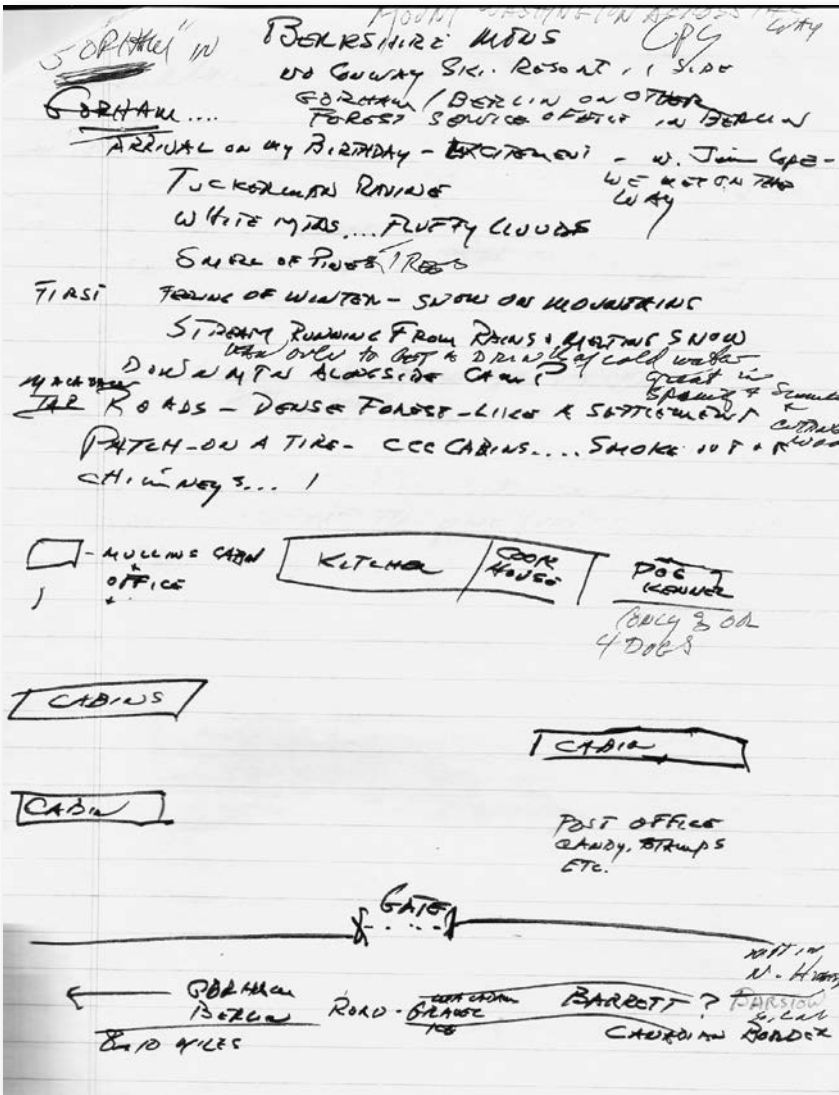
7. A boy scout who has reached the highest level of achievement in scouting.

most likely relied upon this coal stove to heat only the main part of their home, only retreating to their bedrooms at night, into beds warmed by coal warmers first.

In his speech before the draft board, he emphasized his religious objection quoting from both the Old and New Testaments. By the prophet Micah: “He has shown you, O man, what is good. Or what does the Lord seek from you but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to be ready to walk with the Lord your God?” (Micah 6:8, OSB). And the plea of Jesus: “Love thine enemy as thyself” (Matthew 5:44).

The draft board voted. He was granted conscientious objector (CO) status by a close vote, five voting yes, four voting to deny. The local newspaper reported he was being sent to prison. His father accused him of wasting his degree from Harvard Law school and pronounced that he’d ruined his life. They stopped talking to each other. This schism remained for the rest of his life.

AGAINST THE CURRENT



Map of the logging camp, Gorham, NH