

FREE THINKERS AND DOERS

M.J. Politis, Ph.D., D.V.M., H.B.A.R.P.

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[mjpolitis@yahoo.com](mailto:mjpolitis@yahoo.com)

## CHAPTER 1

The town of Pineridge Falls didn't have any pine trees in it, nor were there any waterfalls, and, to be honest, it was more of a collection of small squeezed together hamlets than a town. A town, even by 1850s West Texas standards, had to have a saloon, a general store and a spare building that could be converted into a storefront that sold whatever was wanted or needed by the townsfolks. As for said folk, they were kind folks. Hard working people. Caring human beings who gave a shit about whoever walked on two legs or trotted on four. They were intelligent as well. Smart enough to know that if they didn't leave what in future generations would be called Germany after the failed 1848 rebellions against the Kings and Capitalists, they would be slaves to new and even more powerful masters.

These Freethinkers, as they chose to call themselves, didn't choose to live in Texas. But when the boat you smuggled yourself and your family on in in Amsterdam decided that it was profitable to bring Slaves to Houston rather than ragamuffin rebel immigrants who spoke as much accentless English as the White slavers had compassion for their Black cargo, you set up camp where you were thrown ashore.

It was like that for this, initially anyway, collection of Freethinkers families. Family being defined as a man, woman, and various number of offspring from them (or other partners they didn't talk about) who needed more than loved or liked each other. As for particulars, you probably expect me to give you the essentials.

There was Hans J.S. Muller, a master carpenter, passable printer, and prolific scholar in the arts as well as sciences in print. He ate less than anyone else in the community and worked even harder at his printing press and carpentry shop. Yet he still looked more portly with his double chinned prematurely puffed out face and torso than anyone else in the photographs of the citizenry of transplanted

Freethinkers he insisted taking for the day when the collective hamlet would become a major city. Elsa, his mistress back in the old country, accompanied him to the new one. His wife Lisa had turned against the Revolution back in Hamburg, then against her husband Hans when the Police came in to arrest the rabblerousers.

Elsa wasn't much to look at. Her scrawny body lacked any feminine definition on the hips or the chest. Her featureless plain brown hair made her nose seem two times bigger than its actual size. But Hans made her think she was beautiful. Or tried to anyway, referring to her as 'the Aspasia to the Socrates inside of me that you bring out'.

Elsa had been Hans' favorite student when he was still allowed to teach in the university back home. She knew more than Hans did about the philosopher-courtesan Mistress who Socrates found refuge with after having to spend any time with his unappreciative, social-climber wife. Or so she convinced him anyway. Applying Socratic theoretical principles to a world where few people read or cared about philosophy texts was another matter.

There was the idea that democracy was the most enlightened form of government. It was a social experiment that Socrates neither liked nor trusted, particularly because he was put to death by a show of hands from the general citizenry for corrupting the youth. Those same schleps of course erected a statue in his honor 2 weeks after the execution. But Professor Doctor Muller told himself as well as the students who he tried to change into his kind of revolutionaries that such behavior was the typical way Greeks oscillated between ideological extremes. Of course, it was an irrefutable law of Nature that was not-so-shabby ideology A doesn't give 100 percent results, naturally the cure is go to ideology B or Anti-A.

Then there was the credo that Socrates said, and Plato wrote down, that the ultimate result of intelligence is virtue. And that the only precursor of cruelty was ignorance. It was that latter 'truth' that Hans held onto most. Perhaps it was because he, as his ex-wife Lisa claimed, cared with his head rather than felt compassion with his heart. And, in theory as well as Hans' projection of it into reality, advancing intelligence always does result in the realization that what goes around comes around. What you give is what you eventually get back, somehow.

It was Elsa who pointed out, as a joke, at a Texas barbecue between semesters in the 'all are welcomed' Pinegrove schoolhouse (which Hans tried to convert into an innovative frontier university for the literate, functionally-illiterate and pathologically-literate) that 'do unto others how you would like them to do to you' worked for anyone who wasn't a masochist. She knew more about herbs and medicine than most doctors. But Elsa was smart enough to not let them know that when treating human or animal patients, as she continued to make more witticisms that stimulated thought as well as laughter. But Hans didn't get her jokes at that event, concentrating instead on educating his dinner guests about the use of German and Commanche spices to make Texas beef taste like manna from the gods rather than ribeye just off the hoof.

Carl Richter, a generously follicled, slender, tastefully muscled man who was 'easy on the eyes' for whoever glanced his way, be they male or female, had been a master navigator when working on the ships in the North Sea. He had an instinct for knowing exactly where the craft he was on was. By any means possible, he had the annoying habit of suggesting the best course to every overbearing Captain by looking at the stars rather than the compass. But when on land, Carl's complete lack of talent managing farm animals and black thumb with regard to growing anything except weeds in the garden and blisters on his fingers were in direct contrast to his ability to fix any machinery made of metal and wood. As for how he instinctively knew how to fix mechanical 'beasts' with broken many parts using very few tools and even fewer improvised spare parts, it was due to 'something that I was told when looking at the stars.' Of course, when the Pastor or Doctor came around to ask for more particulars, Richter said he was 'consulting

with the heavenly Father' or 'memories that were stored in my strangely wired brain from when I was a child'.

Carl Richer's wife Nadia, a forty-years still vibrant woman whose black hair flowed down to her slender waist which was complimented by shapely hips and generous mammary tissue above her super healthy (in more ways than one) heart, didn't understand any of the gibberish coming out of her husband's mouth when he was consulting with 'visitors from the stars'. But she knew the most important two skills for eccentrics who wanted to stay alive, be fed and not be burnt at the stake by commoner villagers. Keep the masses technically hostage, which Carl did every day with his wizardry. Or keep the townsfolk entertained, which she did every night with her gift of converting sound from violin strings and air going though vocal cords into music.

Nadia and Carl had three children, a boy, George, a girl, Louisa and someone who didn't seem to belong exclusively to either gender between the ears, who they named Sasha. None of them were exceptionally talented in the arts or sciences. But they were far more skilled at interhuman communication than their parents. Somehow when any one of the children said 'please don't fight' or 'most people like people who are more interesting than different' to their parents, the other two joined in with particulars about such that kept the family intact. When those children were not able to nurture each other, they sought the aid and guidance they needed from Aunt Sarah Weissman and Uncle Solomon Schaumburg.

Sarah and Solomon were very dedicated to their own children. In Sarah's case it was her violin and for Solomon it was his guitar. Each of them in their younger years sought marital partners who would be their equals as music composers and performers, but they soon realized that creativity is a solitary endeavor. Such was true particularly when you wanted to give the world music that would enlighten rather than please the listener, like their mutually admired bachelor for life muse and mentor, Beethoven. A rule of this world, and maybe most of the others, was

that someONE composed or sung the melody, and someone, or someones, provided the harmony.

Sarah and Solomon grew up in the same mostly Jewish village which was pillaged and repopulated by Gentiles who kept conquering each other . According to everyone, most importantly Sarah's parents on the industrious side of Telenkefka and Solomon's mother and father from the colorful district of that over-populated village, they would be a perfect match. Every other member of the exclusively (officially anyway) Jewish community and, according to the gypsy mystic, dog, cat and mule seemed to agree. Rightly or wrongly, Sarah and Solomon chose to disagree with that mandate, leaving Telenkefka in different directions geographically, politically and psychologically as soon as they were able to.

By the time Sarah and Solomon somehow survived to the half century mark, their hair grew longer and thicker than in their youth with just a touch of grey on the temples, the crow's feet around their eyes making them seem younger than their age, somehow. Rumor had it that each of them had a special talent of stealing energy, hopes and youthful looks from the 'non-touched commoners' they had jumped into relationships with. Both Sarah and Solomon had outgrown or miscalculated what they anticipated getting from no less than three potential 'soulmates'. Those 'victims' whose lives were made more painful and/or interesting than they should have, with greying hair, wrinkle been as a result of Sarah and Solomon's 'experiments in interspecies relationships', were from many different religious faiths, very much including religious believers in atheism. The lessons learned, or not learned, found their way into their music. Music that, for five years after they separated as musicians due to 'creative differences', was not nearly as good as when they separated, as artists anyway.

Sarah and Solomon performed for each other as much as for the (as they called them, in private of course) 'earthlings' who hired them for weddings, funerals, baptisms and brisques. It did seem like a prophesy fulfilled, as their Orthodox Jewish parents had told them that one day they would finally settle down to

create the next generation of ‘assets rather than liabilities to the world’ from within their Hebrew roots. And that their more often than not unpopular music would be blessed, fueled and inspired if they wrote the lyrics in Yiddish or Hebrew.

The latter did happen after Sarah’s mother was rendered a cripple following multiple rapes and Solomon’s father was sent to, I hope anyway, a blissful afterlife or next life without ‘loving’ Christians after a series of Pogroms that swept through Prussian-controlled Poland. Childhood friends, but not lovers, Sarah and Solomon hardly recognized each other at Solomon’s funeral, aka Shiva. The religiously anti-science rabbi and the now atheist overworked doctor in attendance suggested that Solomon and Sarah play a song together. Both claimed that it would stimulate the neuronal circuits in Sarah’s mother’s traumatized mind so that they would not only bring enough strength to her legs to be able to not only walk again, but to dance. She did. And according to the conversation Ida Weissman was having with was none other than, officially anyway, platonic lover Jacob Schaumburg’s ghost. At least according to the Kabala gypsy mystic in attendance.

Yes, in the non-Pale regions of old country populated by believers in Jesus or Modern Science, Solomon and Sarah learned how to compose and perform love songs to pay for their supper as a non-married couple who kept many couples who were married together, at least for another night, week or year. A coda, would offer the crowd something that would feed their souls, and free their tyrant or self-oppressed souls. The penalty of course was having to move to the next town. Sometimes it was because the crowd, and those who ruled them, smelled ‘Jew’ in their demeanor and music. Sometimes it was because the ‘find your own relationship with God’ message in their music scared those who were afraid to die or consider that God was not an anthropomorphized replica of a father they never had, or lost too early in their childhood. Sometimes it was about just suggesting that things can and should be changed politically, socially and relationally. Most of their audience of course had the ‘good sense’ to live behind prison walls of their own construction. Or they entrusted their lives and those of their beloved

offspring which were the devil they know rather than the God that was probably out there, somewhere.

Solomon and Sarah found their tribe when they offered to entertain the non-uniformed 'troops' who had no rank, and no loyalty to any one country, or religion just prior to the 1848 revolutions. They provided custom-made anthems for the Revolutionaries from no less than 20 ethnic backgrounds, bringing them together in common cause. Songs that, of course, became perverted, misunderstood or banned as soon as they became popular. Such was an occupation that provided Solomon and Sarah no time to create little revolutionaries of their own. And that required them to proudly proclaim one fateful night in Hamburg, due to the desire to be honest with themselves, and others, that they were dedicated Jews liberated from dogmatic Judaism.

Soon afterward, they were framed for mass murder of three Russian Counts, two Prussian Duchesses and ten British Industrialists at a party they had crashed after they were accused of poisoning the punch and cajoling ten future kings, queens and capitalistic moguls into singing Satanic verses which led them to take a jump off a cliff together so they could become united with their New Master in the Underworld. No one exactly knew who set up Solomon and Sarah for being behind the infamous 'night of murder and demonically-inspired death' in Dusseldorf Castle. But there was a mixed motive in the eyes of the rabbi from their home village who gave them 'donated from the congregation' tickets for passage to Texas a day before they were to be hanged for high and Holy treason back home. Two days before their planned execution, the Rabbi from back home, who was both bald and wrinkled long before his time, was allowed visitation rights into their cell. He was surprisingly far better fed and clothed than any other Jew from back home. He snuck a key into the loaf of bread which was to be Sol and Sarah's last meal, along with two tickets for a steamer. Also included was a note to the over half century old musicians who grew more vibrant and attractive to the eye with each passing year that 'when God give good looks of the young in your old age, he assigns you other agendas in other places, a curse and a blessing.'

Solomon and Sarah figured out upon arriving in Texas that though there was official separation of Church and State, it was best to not tell people what you believed regarding what could be felt with the heart but not confirmed by the brain. Actually, after a while, they didn't really know what they believed. But they adopted 'provisional hypotheses' to make life meaningful, survivable and less lonely. Particularly when being adopted as aunt and uncle by the children in Pinegrove Falls, knowing that biology said that they would never be able to have their own.

While most of the 'White' population in Pinegrove Falls was born on the other side of the Pond, the 'almost White' proportion of citizens were Tejanos. Spanish-speaking Catholics who, for the most part, supported the 'Revolution for Independence and Freedom' led by White Americans who came into Texas before 1834, and decided it was time to rebel against the oppressive yolk of Mexican Dictator-President Santa Anna. Of course, the fact that they were Americans did give them the divine right to settle and steal the vast expanses of what at that time was still Mexico. And they had the God given right to not have to convert to Catholicism. And, most importantly, they had the Congressionally-guaranteed right to bring their own Black Slaves into a country that, officially anyway, banned slavery.

In exchange for helping the Americans to establish the Free Republic of Texas, the Hispanic Tejanos were pushed down the totem pole nearly to the level of the Black Slaves. It was an unpleasant job of course, but after all, if the Will of God is for White American males to own all the land and people in North America, such was the Natural Order of things. Then, in 1846, when it was time for Texas to officially become part of America, some Tejanos turned against their White 'comrades' who boasted the 'remember the Alamo' battlecry when drunk with nationalism or rockgut whiskey. A small detail of that agenda was, of course, for Americans to invade Mexico.

Victor Gonzalez, sporting with more hair on his upper lip than his prematurely balding head, had lost his left leg fighting for Texan independence to Santa Anna's cannon fire. His reward for that service was to lose ownership of most of his ranch to a Mississippian judge who was put in charge of land allocations after the Texan republic was founded in 1836. But unlike second cousin Juan Seguin and half brother Carlos de la Garza, Tejanos who fought under and for General Sam Houston, Victor didn't don a Mexican Army uniform when the call of his home country of Mexico sounded the call to arms to defend itself.

Victor Gonzales also refused to put on an American Army uniform to defend the new state and country of Texas. It cost him the rest of his land and an all expense paid vacation in a military prison twenty miles outside of Austin. But, it spared him the burden of having to take care of his needy wife and spoiled children so that he would not be harassed by the Gringo immigrants who made up the majority of the population in his once Spanish speaking town. With the aid of Comanches who were in need of horses to ride and white soldiers to torture, Gonzales was liberated from 'duty' as a protect trustee in Jaconia Prison. Gonzales did find his wife, daughter and two sons, They were scraping living, or rather an existence, in a boom town that had no name yet, but did contain posters of himself as a wanted fugitive. His wife Maria suggested that Victor join the Americans in the war against his fellow Mexicans, but Gonzales refused to follow her advise. 'I will fight no more forever', he pledged to Maria, his daughter and his two sons, Carlos and Diego. Carlos, who joined the Mexican Army, considered his father a coward. Diego, whose liking for blonde haired Southern belles rather than home grown senioritas, enlisted with the Americans. Victor's daughter, Victoria, who aspired to be a learned Nun or a scholarly Journalist, thought her father to be a saint. Maria considered her husband Victor to be an idealistic fully grown 'problem child' who was going through a phase who needed protection from his erratic passion for unpopular ideologies. Such led Maria, Victoria and Victor them eventually to Pinegrove Falls, an isolated town filled with people who were rumored to be the most closed mouth, best secret keeping immigrants in Texas, or Mexico. Secrets that they kept from each other as well, with walls to protect anyone from finding them out that were constructed with materials far more impregnable than wire, wood or stone. Victor recognized this as an asset,

a gift. Maria thought it to be a problem, and a curse, particularly when her husband shared less and less of his real thoughts with her other than how many ears of corn he had harvested or how many of their cows were still on the open range. Fifteen year old Victoria found the whole thing fascinating, writing accounts of such in her daily diary in mirror-writing mixed Spanish and English that she would translate into German. Or perhaps Russian one day, to be published in Europe, of course.

Munich born Lydia Schwartz and Georgia-raised Lizzy Ann Johnson were the most voluptuous women in town. Every man in town gazed at them for three seconds more than was socially appropriate, or noticed by their wives. Those involuntarily, biologically-based captured stares were returned with a smile and a 'we both have to get back to business' subtle nod from the two ladies. Both of them had a way of deflecting any small town gossip delivered their way by other citizens bearing vaginas rather than penises. In conversations with citizens of Pinegrove Falls of either gender, the 'L' ladies somehow elevate them to 'ethereal' levels. Indeed, these two women of intellect as well as beauty displayed and encouraged us, me anyway, to appreciate the truism that those of the highest intelligence talked about ideas and ideals. Those of lesser intellect yapped about events, sports and politics. And those who actively embraced the comfort and security of ignorance bantered about who did what to who, and what they were wearing at the time. But when things got personal regarding why they were sharing a house as Comrades and not as biologically related siblings, they avoided the temptation to go into any truthful details. Though, as far as the quality and sanity of the love they had for each other, it beat any dynamic that I saw, or felt, in anyone else in town.

There was one population of people who were not in our fair 'city'. People of color. It was thought that the ban of slavery that was the first and fifth of the ten 'civil rather than religious' commandments which were our only laws would invite Africans and African Americans to come live with us. But those Colored folk who were emancipated chose to live with others of the same hue.

There were other families who wound up settling in Pinegrove Falls after Hans placed a stake into the short-grass-and sagebrush covered ground, naming it such prior to constructing the first structure with timber that had to be floated down the river. Some were other Freethinkers from other German speaking kingdoms overseas. Some were Quakers. Some were American born Texans who heard that Comanches left 'Dutchie-eggheads' alone when going on raids because those German speaking immigrants were the only Whites who actually kept their word to the Indians after an agreement for who could own (or more accurately, use on Nature's terms) land was reached.

And then there's me. Stefan to my friends in Russia. Steven or just 'Steve' to my Comrades here. I was born a Cossack in the Don River region of Ukraine, the oldest of three brothers, who had the 'honor' of serving in the Czar's Imperial Army in Siberia, so that the rest of my family would be able to rule themselves on the Steppes. The fee for the Czar minding his own business and letting us screw up our own was a duty which involved educating stone age Pagan Yakuts in Siberia about the benefits of 19<sup>th</sup> century technology. And the perks one gets in the afterlife if you live your life as an obedient, tax paying Eastern. And, as an unofficial officer in the Czar's Imperial Army, my offering them protection from renegade non-military Cossack marauders, my other role with a change of wardrobe, being one of those marauders. My wanting to inform the surrendering, defeated and humiliated Chief of the Yakut tribe that it was a set up used since the 16<sup>th</sup> century was halted by my high ranking commanding Imperial Army officer, and my well paid fellow Cossack comrades putting a price on my head. When I went to the Chief to seek shelter with his tribe, he blamed me for being part of the problem, which, truth be told, I was.

Eventually I headed West, finding that my Cossack village in Ukraine was burnt to the ground for an offense against the Czar that only the ghosts of the slain knew. Then, after cutting off my warlock, I worked my way to what had been Poland 50 years earlier, and finally Munich where I met Hans, Carl et al and the hope of a revolution that would save the world from itself. But, like the Pugachev revolt on the Steppes that my Grandfather believed would solidify a homeland for Cossacks,

the best laid and most bravely carried out plans of men, and women, were quenched by European versions of Czars and an even more dangerous ruler---business moguls who rose to power by cleverly accumulating wealth and power rather than inheriting it. But when we Revolutionaries took over the halls of government for the brief time that we did, it was our ignorance, arrogance and perhaps greed that caused we 1848'ers everywhere in Europe to be defeated by the kings and capitalists. Those of us who weren't killed were tossed into jail, or exile. Or, subjugation.

It is 'rationally based' subjugation to oppression that is the most dangerous for well intended souls dedicated to making a positive difference in the world. That 'pick your battles carefully' and 'retreat or submit so you can fight another day' strategy for survival which leads to living. And there was no shortage of that when we finally got to Texas. Particularly on the most glorious day in the history of our town which turned into the most tragic days to follow, for which we were responsible. Or were we?