



Remembering Paul Corey

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I cannot recall where and when in the thirties I first met Paul Corey and his poet wife Ruth Lechlitner. It may well have been in Greenwich Village about the time they had returned from Europe where they had made the acquaintance of D. H. Lawrence. But it was in Cold Spring-on-the-Hudson where I was a frequent week-end guest that the friendship between the three of us blossomed into a robust one that was to continue throughout their lives. Preferring the country to the city, the Coreys had bought a small chicken farm on which Paul, a formidable handyman, had built a spacious house with his own hands. Because Paul often traded the eggs produced by his hens for building materials, a friend of the Coreys dubbed the finished product "The house built on a foundation of eggs." Except for Paul's talent to build anything, furniture as well as houses, we had much in common, not only ideologically (both of us were anti-Fascist at a time when the *New York Times* was praising Mussolini for making Italian trains run on time) but also in our literary tastes and aspirations.

Paul was then publishing short stories in little magazines and was working on a first novel, *Three Miles Square* (1939) which was to become part of a trilogy about Iowa farm life. Ruth, in turn, was winning recognition as a fine poet while indulging in her passion for cats, wildflowers, and gardening. Besides all these interests, she kept the family solvent writing book reviews, chiefly for the *New York Herald-Tribune* during the years of Irita Van Doren's editorship, as well as biographical sketches of American authors for H. W. Wilson's *Current Biography* series, one of which she wrote of me when *Mount Allegro*, my first book, was published in 1943. Paul and Ruth made a great team. Paul, who had not been a cat-lover before

his marriage, became one to such an extent that he wrote two books about them, *Do Cats Think?* and *Are Cats People?* Both did well in the marketplace.

As a means of contributing to the family finances, about 1937 Paul reluctantly left his Croton-on-the-Hudson farm to join the writing staff of the New York State Federal Writers' Project in Albany at a monthly salary of \$125.00. Unlike the rest of his colleagues, Paul had no difficulty getting his state guidebook copy approved by the Washington staff of the Writers' Project. His amazed supervisor once exclaimed: "You're the only sonofabitch on the staff who can write the kind of stuff they like in Washington." For Paul, writing guidebook copy was far more simple than working on a novel but not as exciting, and he longed to return to his unfinished manuscript and his farm. With that in mind, partly out of boredom and partly to test the alertness of his supervisor, he incorporated a spirited defense of Benedict Arnold in some guidebook copy, expecting to be fired for it. Although this material was rejected, there was no thought of firing him.

Paul was by nature a conscientious worker, so much so that he became openly critical of a colleague who steadily ignored the Project work in order to write political campaign speeches for a friend. Resenting the criticism, the colleague initiated a poison-pen campaign which alleged that Paul Corey was a Communist. Paul had no difficulty clearing himself of the charge, but the incident left a bad taste in his mouth, and he decided to resign. Fearful of losing the services of a worker whose writings required little or no editing, Henry Alsberg, the director of the national project, summoned Paul to Washington and asked him to reconsider. But after listening to all of Paul's reasons for resigning, Alsberg heaved a sigh and, turning to the assistant who had wanted Paul reinstated, said: "Let the man go back to his wife and chickens."

When he was not writing novels or short stories, Paul was a frequent and eloquent dissenter who enjoyed addressing complaints to newspapers, politicians, and capitalistic enterprises that irked him. At the end of each letter he invariably wrote:

“Copy to Drew Pearson,” the famous writer of the nationally syndicated column, “Washington Merry-Go-Round.” He also found time to become a keen student of military problems and was seldom at a loss to analyze the political and military strategy of any nation involved in World War II. A year after the United States entered the war, Paul had applied for an army commission, expecting that his great fund of military information would be useful to the intelligence service. Quite confident of receiving the commission but unhappy at the prospect of leaving behind a lonely wife, he waived his long-standing objection to bringing children into a disaster-prone world in order that Ruth could occupy herself with their child while he was in the army. The child, Anne, a daughter with Paul’s blue eyes and blond hair, was born a few weeks before the army notified Paul that his application for a commission had been rejected.

Our friendship, which I always treasured, even after Paul had moved to Sonoma, California, to escape the severe winters of upstate New York, was of such durability that it was even able to survive the emotional tennis match of a literary collaboration. Shortly before the Fascist-inspired Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Paul and I wrote a one-act play, *The Loyalist*, which was based on Prosper Merimée’s short story masterpiece, “Matteo Falcone,” in which a Corsican father executes his corruptible young son for betraying a refugee from the law. Instead of Corsica, our setting was Spain, and our protagonists were Spanish Loyalists and Fascists. The play was completed but never produced because we insisted on keeping the ending intact as Merimée had written it. That a father could bring himself to kill his own son for aiding and abetting the enemy was too grim a resolution for American audiences, according to the producers who read the script.

While nothing came of our collaborative effort, it deepened my respect for Paul Corey’s ability to write convincingly of characters who were totally removed from his own experience.

Clearly, it was Paul's gift of sensibility that welcomed the fact that his midwest Anglo-Saxon background bore little resemblance to my Sicilian heritage.

At my advanced age many of my friends are no longer of this world. Paul is one of those that I miss the most.