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MAURY ROBERTS: MAN, EDITOR, TEACHER

STEPHEN YALE-LOEHR*

I suspect a lot of you are like me. That is, you've always associated Maury with *Interpreter Releases* and didn't fully realize what a distinguished career Maury had before becoming editor of *Interpreter Releases* fifteen years ago. In fact, some people have asked where the name *Interpreter Releases* came from, and why the publication isn't named the *Maury Roberts Reporter* — just like I.F. Stone had a weekly named after him. Well, Maury asked me to remind you that *Interpreter Releases* is in its sixty-seventh year of publication. No, that doesn't mean that he edited it on the side while chairing the Board of Immigration Appeals, or that he started it when he was twelve years old. There *were* other editors before him.

First, let me set the stage. Imagine this head table as Maury's desk. The table may be a little bigger than Maury's desk, perhaps, but not too far off. The problem is, his desk is piled so high with papers, you can not see Maury. Court decisions fill the floor. Correspondence cascades off the desk, and bumps into his phone and his ever-present coffee mug. Classical music plays softly in the background. Buried in the middle of all this is Maury. Maury, who arrives at 8:00 a.m. after a long commute, invariably eats lunch at his desk, munching a sandwich and an apple as he critiques the Supreme Court's latest immigration decisions. Maury, who leaves only after 5:00 p.m. for another long commute home, his briefcase jammed with more work to do that night.

Why is a man almost 80 years old working so hard? Why did Maury become editor of *Interpreter Releases*?

One theory comes from a book by Elizabeth O'Connor called *The New Community*. Ms. O'Connor wrote that each stage of life gives us larger tasks, and that God, or Buddha, or whoever you may or may not believe in, reserves for the old those tasks that can be accomplished only after a lifetime of growth, experience, and learning.

Well, whether God or Buddha specifically reserved the editorship of

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The text of this tribute comes from remarks made at the American Immigration Law Foundation Dinner given in honor of Maurice A. Roberts in Seattle, Washington on Thursday, June 7, 1990.

Interpreter Releases for Maury is open for debate. I will wait for St. Peter at the pearly gates to tell me.

A second common story about why Maury became editor of *Interpreter Releases* is that he accepted it as a retirement job after finishing up at age sixty-five as Chairman of the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA). According to this story, Edith Lowenstein, Maury's predecessor as editor, persuaded him to take the job, insisting that he would only have to work about twenty hours a week, and that he could use the other time to finally take his wife Lillian on the trips that he had long promised her.

Lillian was skeptical of this claim from the first, and recalls a cocktail party at which she jokingly threatened Edith with dire consequences if Maury ended up working more than part-time. Time would prove Lillian's fear well-founded.

What happened to Edith? I am sad to report that she died a few years ago, but can happily say it was from natural causes, and not because Lillian carried out her threat.

Anyhow, when Maury began editing *Interpreter Releases* in late 1974, our publication averaged about 400 pages a year. Now we do almost four times that much, and still do not feel like we keep on top of everything.

So why did Maury become editor of *Interpreter Releases*? I think the answer is more complicated than either of the two suggestions I have mentioned. I think the answer is partly the publication, but more importantly, Maury's personality.

Maury feels *Interpreter Releases* plays an important role in immigration law, and he is very proud of that fact. Yet it is in large part *because* of Maury that *Interpreter Releases* is so important. The characteristics that define Maury also define *Interpreter Releases* today. Let me share four of those characteristics with you.

The first characteristic is Maury's knowledge and practical experience. Maury's 50 years of experience, first at the INS and the Justice Department, then as Chairman of the BIA, and now as editor of *Interpreter Releases*, brings a larger dimension to everything we report on, and allows us to place events in a larger historical context.

For example, in 1990 the Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development leaked a draft of its report on recommendations to changes in immigration policy. One of the Commission's main recommendations was to combine the visa issuing functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the State Department into one agency.¹ Now, this was a big story — page

1. See 67 *Interpreter Releases* 663 (June 18, 1990).

one news in the *Washington Post* and all that — and we youngsters on the staff were all excited. Maury's calm reaction: "history repeats itself," he said. He then recounted how, in the late 1940's, the FBI did a similar study with similar recommendations that went nowhere.

Another example. We recently wrote a story about Commissioner McNary's plans to centralize operations at the INS. I did a lot of work on the story, and thought it was pretty good, but then Maury added one paragraph that made it much better. He wrote that this move to centralize is a 180-degree shift from 1955, when General Swing, who was Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, decentralized the INS and set up four regions, leaving only a lean, mean core of top policy makers at the INS headquarters.

The second factor that makes Maury and *Interpreter Releases* so great is his ability to make events come alive, by explaining the personalities and politics behind dry statutory language or court opinions. I have often heard Maury recount the tale of Carlos Marcello, the mafia king of New Orleans. Maury toiled for years, unsuccessfully, to try to get Marcello deported from the United States. It was in large part because of the government's inability to deport Carlos Marcello that Congress, in frustration, enacted Section 106,² the judicial review provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act, with all its attendant problems and ambiguities. We are still living with that legacy today, thirty years later.

On a more personal note, often I will go into Maury's office trying to puzzle out an ambiguous statute or regulation, and emerge a half-hour later, after Maury has told me the real reason how that language got to be the way it is. Maury, modest as he is, apologizes for wasting my time with such long explanations. But that is not true. I always learn a lot from them, and feel they are a particularly worthwhile aspect of working with him. I am sure many of you have similar stories.

A third important aspect about Maury is his relentless pursuit of excellence. Vince Lombardi once said, "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence." That is Maury to me.

For example, every Tuesday, after having reviewed Monday's issue for errors, he invariably says, "Well, Steve, we really gave them their money's worth on that issue, didn't we?" He says it so often - every week - that you would think it was a joke, but he is always dead serious when he says it.

Even a simple misspelled word warrants an immediate correction notice and an apology in the next issue. As Maury says, when you do not have any real competition, you have to be your own competition, to keep your standards of excellence high.

2. 8 U.S.C. § 1106 (1988).

Another example of Maury's excellence is the way he writes. He still writes his articles on a yellow legal pad - dozens and dozens of pages each week. But rarely is a word crossed out on his drafts, or a sentence or paragraph rearranged. He edits in his mind before the word hits the page.

A fourth and final factor that I think led Maury to become editor of *Interpreter Releases* is that he is a teacher at heart, and the best kind of teacher, because he teaches by example. Not by constant lecturing at us, or by bragging about how much he knows, but rather, because of his own enthusiasm and love for the subject, he inspires others.

Examples of the teacher in Maury abound, from the wisdom of his editor's comments to his willingness to talk on the phone at length with anybody who calls with questions, whether they be brand-new beginners or top experts.

Through these daily examples, Maury has inspired me and many others.

In conclusion, on behalf of the immigration law community, I join the *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* in thanking Maury for all that he is, for sharing himself with us, and for inspiring us.