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Searching for Answers
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Omaha Blues: A Memory Loop

By Joseph Lelyveld

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 226 pages, \$22

The New York Times publicly imploded in 2003 when the unmasking of a fraudulent reporter, Jason Blair, led to a staff revolt and the ouster of Executive Editor Howell Raines. Only one person emerged from the mess with a burnished reputation: Joseph Lelyveld, Raines' predecessor, who was called out of retirement to pick up the pieces and steady the newspaper until a new top editor could be named.

Until Raines' downfall, Lelyveld was widely stereotyped as an indecisive and passive editor who had allowed the Times to twist slowly in the journalistic winds as the pace of newsgathering increased rapidly with the growth of the Internet. Lelyveld's awkward and diffident manner may have contributed heavily to his perceived image problem, but in the wake of the Raines upheavals, Lelyveld's cold-fish reputation was superseded by a new patina of a solid old reliable.

Joseph Lelyveld thus is not someone whom you would expect to publish a vividly emotional and painfully compelling family memoir. Lelyveld explicitly rejects the memoir label, however, insisting instead on the odd moniker "memory loop," since his memory, he says, "runs in loops."

Lelyveld's memories of his childhood are far from happy. His father, Arthur, an emotionally distant man who became a prominent rabbi in Cleveland, and his mother, Toby, an impetuously unstable woman who tried to kill herself at least three times, were poorly suited for each other and for parenthood. "I had lived with the sense all my life that, at an early age, I was abandoned by my parents, that I was incidental to what was going on in their lives," Lelyveld recently told a New York magazine interviewer.

Writing "Omaha Blues" was "a kind of self-therapy," Lelyveld said, indulging what, in the book, he self-mockingly calls "the urge pathetic old folks baffled by life's swift passage sometimes feel to find out what actually happened when they were too young or too stunned to take it all in." It was a retracing Lelyveld previously had avoided, for he had long been aware that "I didn't want to stop my life to look back."

As a child, Lelyveld explains, "I became guarded, pensive, and . . . unusually but not happily self-sufficient." By young adulthood he understood "that I needed to keep a safe distance from my parents," and in mid-life he was shocked to learn that his youngest brother's father was actually a longtime family friend. With that news, Lelyveld recalls, "the careful assortment of warm memories to which I'd clung as a child had now been torn to shreds, revealed to have been nothing more than a tissue of illusion and wish fulfillment."

Taught by that revelation to distrust "my tattered and fallible and possibly treacherous memory," Lelyveld held himself at arm's length from his own life, only rarely looking back. In 1976, a newspaper assignment took Lelyveld to Nebraska, where his family briefly had lived during his early childhood. He successfully located the old Omaha homestead, the geographical peg for this book's title, and learned that it was now owned by a social-welfare agency. Lelyveld recounts calling his brother David "to tell him that our old house was now a home for problem children. 'So what else is new?' he shot back."

Only later in life, just a few weeks before his father's death, did Lelyveld grudgingly begin to reconnect with his past. While Lelyveld was visiting his father in a Cleveland hospice, another visitor, an old synagogue staff colleague of his father's, asked Lelyveld if he would like to see "the camp trunk in the temple's basement" that was full of old family letters and photographs. Down they went, but Lelyveld found the contents "suffocating. I closed the lid sharply, meaning to stick the genie of reminiscence and helpless disappointment back in its box." But after his father died several weeks later, "I arranged to have the contents of the old trunk shipped to my Hudson Valley house," where Lelyveld left them unexamined for six years, until his first retirement from the Times.

What finally got Lelyveld started on his journey of rediscovery were his happy memories of an intriguingly mysterious young rabbi who had been "the closest adult friend of my boyhood." Benjamin Goldstein had led a temple in Montgomery, Ala., in the 1930s, before his outspoken support for the Scottsboro boys, nine young black men falsely accused of rape, spurred his congregation to fire him. Many of the defendants' most ardent champions were members of the Communist Party USA, and after being driven from Montgomery, Goldstein moved to Los Angeles, where he worked for a film company that was part of Amtorg, the Soviet Union's official trading company.

When Goldstein married Juliet Lowell, a young widowed mother with two children, he adopted her surname, and in 1948 he took a job with the Hillel Foundations, with Arthur Lelyveld as his boss.

"Ben was the one adult in my life who seemed consistently and reliably available," Lelyveld remembers. Lowell took him on all sorts of wonderful outings that normally a father would host. Major-league baseball games were memorable events for a lonely young boy, or they were until Arthur Lelyveld, at the height of the rabidly anti-communist McCarthy era, fired Ben Lowell because he had allegedly "been untruthful about his involvement in the Communist Party." Lowell vanished from his young friend's life and died of cancer a few years later.

Even as a teenager, Lelyveld understood the political controversy over American communism: His favorite schoolmate's parents were party activists, and Gil Green, his friend's uncle, was one of the party's top leaders. But, Lelyveld writes, "I was living closer than I knew to the crosscurrents of that time."

When he finally examined the contents of his father's trunk, Lowell's story was the one that most interested him. He obtained a copy of Lowell's FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act, but it failed to resolve the question that had led to his firing by Arthur Lelyveld: Had he ever been a member of the Communist Party?

"That Ben hadn't deviated from the party line for something like fifteen years was a fact," Lelyveld acknowledges, but the FBI documents raised a far more ominous possibility. While

Ben was living in Los Angeles in the early 1940s, a close acquaintance had been Vasily Zarubin, the KGB's highest-ranking agent in the U.S. Under the pseudonym Vasily Zubilin, Zarubin had directed the KGB's pursuit of America's atom-bomb secrets, and Lowell had entertained Zubilin at his home.

Lelyveld cannot answer fully the mystery of Goldstein/Lowell, but the depth of his affection for him far surpasses the begrudging ambivalence he exhibits toward his father. In 1964, Arthur Lelyveld briefly took part in Freedom Summer, the civil rights movement's death-defying challenge to Mississippi segregation. When a white thug assaulted him, a photo of his bloodied visage ran in newspapers around the world. Busy with a reporting assignment, his son phoned the hospital and then returned to work.

Thirty years later, Lelyveld drolly recounts, he received a survey addressed to him as the Times' top editor:

" 'Have you ever heard of Hattiesburg, Mississippi? the first question asked. I checked "yes." If yes, in what context? it continued. "My father was beaten there with a tire iron in the summer of 1964," I wrote.' "

It's a wonderful anecdote, but within the context of "Omaha Blues" it only underscores the magnitude of the filial gap. Lelyveld likewise recounts his irritation when a college anthology reprinted one of his articles and identified the author as " 'a distinguished rabbi.' " "Even by present-day academic standards, the editors who researched my background were a little careless," Lelyveld observes.

"Omaha Blues" repeatedly demonstrates what a superb prose stylist can do with his own family's painful tale, but Lelyveld's relentless focus verges on the masochistic. He has written an utterly unforgettable book, but not one that readers will want any of their own family members to emulate.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO (color): (Book cover.)

GRAPHIC (color): Illustration by Katherine Streeter.