Thoughts about my father. Naomi Katz, Jan. 2020

Today you will hear stories about William Katz the historian, the scholar, author of groundbreaking work. I’m here to tell the story of William Katz, the father, from the unique perspective as his daughter. My brother, Michael Katz, would have wanted to be here with us, but he passed away 9 years ago, may his memory a blessing. I know Michael is here with us in spirit today.

My parents met at Syracuse University in 1950, at an NAACP meeting. My father 23, a third generation American and my mother 20, a child refugee from Nazi Europe. After they graduated they married and moved to NYC to attend graduate school. My brother and I were born in NYC a few years later.

When we were still quite young, we moved to a coop apt in Mamaroneck. Both my parents were teachers and sometimes my father had to work several jobs sometimes to make ends meet.

In the early days, my father encouraged swimming and other sports. He was very fond of telling the story of how I learned to swim. I fell into the deep end of a pool at the summer camp dad was directing. I was only four and was leaning over the water trying to grab a frog that was sprinting across the pool. My father was at the shallow end of the pool cleaning it. Instead of running to the deep end and jumping in, my father dove into the shallow end and swam all the way to the deep end to save me. He found it very funny that he didn’t just run to the deep end and grab me. But it showed his instincts and faith in his swimming abilities. And maybe watching one too many Tarzan movies.

I remember how we used to shake the water out of our ears by hopping on one foot with our heads tilted to the side. We called it the turkey hop. My father had an incredible sense of humor, some of you may remember. He loved comedy and slapstick, like the Marx brothers, Laurel and Hardy and the three stooges. He also loved Sean Connery and Peter Sellers. As children he introduced us to comedy records like Stan Freeberg Discovers America. My brother inherited that humor and made many comedy tapes of his own.

I remember the trips to my grandparents’ on Jane street for thanksgiving, with all these aunts and cousins. What a splendid time that was and what an interesting man my grandfather was. He introduced me to Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and Judy Collins when I was still a very young girl. Not my father. He thought those “long hairs” couldn’t hold a candle to his Dixieland Jazz and Blues. He loved Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Jelly Roll Morton, to name a few.

My father introduced us to Chinese food and Orange Julius (with that secret ingredient). We considered that gourmet cuisine in those days. He also took us traveling to places like Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. I learned to love food and fell in love with travel and foreign languages through those experiences.

When I was a preteen my father used to take me to Harlem, to the Schomburg library to help him with his research. I remember feeling a sense of awe, looking around at the rows and rows of books, the dark wood and the smell of pages, leather, mahogany. I understood that this work was very important. And I learned the importance of scholarship and research.

Of course my childhood heroes growing up were people like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. The story of the Underground Railroad was the greatest adventure story I ever heard. And continues to be, into my adult life, as I shared and passed it down to my daughter and my students with the same excitement my father related it to me.

Before I became a teenager, my parents divorced. My father moved back to the city and we moved upstate. The divorce took a toll on our relationship and things between us became complicated. After age 16 we were not in touch for quite a few years.

But through those years my father’s lifelong devotion to uncovering the hidden stories of African American history was an inspiration to me. Stories of triumph over cruelty and oppression, stories of liberation and freedom translated in my life to a desire to research and document the rich manifestations of Afro-New World culture. My passion, born of my father’s passion, impelled me to delve into Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban art forms like samba, salsa, and capoeira. It led me to write and film African religious traditions in Latin America and Creole culture in Louisiana.

A miracle happened about 21 years ago. My father and I were able to rise above our differences and come back together as a family. The impetus was this beautiful child Maya. Barely four years old, she needed and deserved a grandfather in the US. And it could not have happened without Dad’s incredible wife, Laurie, the love of his life, who with the healing power of love, kindness and insight, smoothed the way for us to become a loving family again. And what a wonderful family reunion it has been. Suddenly, after many years apart, we were sharing recipes and cooking together in the kitchen, (two foodies together!), watching movies, laughing and telling jokes, having deep discussions into the night, sharing our lives...

I want to end by saying that in these past 20+ years, my father was a supportive and loving father and grandfather to me and to Maya. He was kind and very sensitive, especially concerning Maya and her needs, as an evolving young adult. He called her his “Sunbeam.” He admired us both for learning multiple languages, being gutsy women and encouraged both of our political activism. He had a profound sense of the importance of truth and justice and backed me 200% in the fight for public education and my union activism. They say we honor our loved ones the most by living as they themselves wished to live. May we honor my father’s memory by continuing the struggle (cause I know everyone here is already in this fight) for what he believed in so profoundly; for justice, for equality, for freedom from oppression, for human dignity. For owning up to the blunders this country has made and continues to make. And doing our best to right the wrongs.