1-1-1998

Tribute to Irwin P. Stotzky

Jean Jean-Pierre

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.law.miami.edu/umialr

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://repository.law.miami.edu/umialr/vol29/iss1/3

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Miami Inter-American Law Review by an authorized administrator of Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact library@law.miami.edu.
TRIBUTE TO IRWIN P. STOTZKY

JEAN JEAN-PIERRE

Some people believe serendipity is at the core of most momentous occurrences in our lives. Others believe our lives were scripted from the genesis of time.

What remains universally indisputable, however, is that the paths we choose are often deeply rooted in our personal beliefs, which are in turn shaped by the people we have encountered and the events we have experienced throughout our existence.

Professor Irwin Stotzky has chosen to defend our rights when they are trampled upon by our fellow human beings in our sometimes Kafkaesque world.

When I first met Irwin in the Spring of 1995, the one thing that struck me about him was his complete and unfeigned commitment to defending human rights and his commitment to the rights of the less fortunate among us.

We were introduced by a mutual friend, Human Rights attorney Michael Ratner, Irwin's former colleague at Yale. Irwin, Michael, Ira Kurzban, and several other attorneys were working at the request of the Aristide Government to bring to justice those responsible for the murders of thousands of Haitians during the reign of the military from 1991 to 1994. Among the victims, the most prominent were Minister of Justice Guy Malary, businessman-activist Antoine Izmery, and Father Jean Marie Vincent. This was, and distressingly still is, a nearly impossible task due to the rudimentary state of Haiti's justice system.

When it became very difficult to find an investigator to work with the attorneys, Michael asked me if I would be interested. I did not reflect for a minute, for his invitation had finally given me an opportunity to do something tangible for the country of my birth. Additionally, I felt my work as a journalist had given me

* Rockland College C.U.N.Y., Lycée Alexandre Pétion. Mr. Jean-Pierre currently writes for The Village Voice. He has previously worked for the Caribbean news Agency and has written numerous articles for many U.S. magazines and newspapers.
the tools to contribute to the investigations. I took a sabbatical as a journalist and became a volunteer investigator. I also believed that due to my accent I could finally emulate a personal idol: Peter Seller’s Inspector Clouseau.

My assignment was to investigate the killings of Justice Minister Guy Malary and Father Jean Marie Vincent. Father Vincent was an activist priest gunned down (apparently) for helping peasants of the region of Jean Rabel organize co-operatives to bypass the traditional big landowners and sell directly to such countries as Germany and Japan.

I was to work directly with Irwin. During our first encounter, I soon realized that, as Michael had informed me, Irwin was absolutely committed to bringing about the justice the Haitian people have sought since the birth of their nation in 1804.

He relentlessly pursued those responsible for these crimes; not just the most celebrated ones, but also the murders of the so-called “nameless Haitians.” In fact, he inspired me to think seriously of becoming a worker in the field of human rights.

All leads were followed. Within days we were able to gather several witnesses to the murders of Minister Malary and Father Vincent. My only difficulty with Irwin—and I am sorry, Irwin, that I have to confide this to you publicly—is the fact that he rarely takes a break. It is easy for him, of course, because he runs at least ten miles a day. After each of our five trips to Haiti, I spent days recuperating from what was tantamount to military drills. Of course I am exaggerating a bit. The truth, however, is that Irwin was most resolute in his quest for justice.

We made several trips inside Haiti’s prisons to meet with some of the accused. Although jail conditions were immensely improved in comparison to those of the Duvaliers and the military, we nevertheless found ourselves in an environment that was not conducive to real investigations. We were interviewing scores of individuals who were either the perpetrators or accused of being part of the most hideous crimes which occurred during the military regime. A few guards armed with night sticks served as our only protection. Not a single prisoner was handcuffed. If this fact ever crossed Irwin’s mind, he kept it to himself. Not once did he mention, nor did I ever detect from him, any concerns for our safety. He was too busy probing and querying the prisoners, some of whom were known killers. Nor did he
express any real concerns over the man who kept following him wherever he went in Haiti. (I later discovered that the man was a spy for one of the rich families in Haiti.) It did not surprise me to learn that in the tough Detroit neighborhood where Irwin grew up they called him “Hawk.”

Although Irwin does not speak fluent Creole, there were times I did not have to translate for him. His keen sense of perception enabled him to understand—sometimes with incredible accuracy—some of the prisoners’ lies. “Tell him he’s going to rot in jail if he doesn’t cooperate,” he would say to me.

Irwin’s courage is illustrated by the following anecdote.

One afternoon in July, we had an appointment to visit the National Penitentiary at 2:00 o’clock. It was about 1:30 when I told Irwin that we should eat before we left the hotel.

“We don’t have much time,” he said, “we will eat when we come back. We don’t want to be late for our appointment at the prison.”

I insisted that we should not go to the prison on an empty stomach. He acquiesced.

At approximately 2:30, when we finally arrived at the vicinity of the prison, we heard loud and successive automatic weapon shots. We were told that some of the prisoners were attempting to break out. We later discovered that the break out attempt took place exactly at 2:15 (so we could have been killed or taken hostages). I adhere to “Haitian time,” and my tardiness and hunger paid off that day.

Irwin said that we should still try to get inside the prison to see some prisoners. Being a journalist, I too wanted to go in, albeit for a different reason. When we arrived in front of the prison, we saw the U.N. special forces huddled at the entrance. I told Irwin to stay with our driver, Tony, so I could go in to explore the possibility of a hot news story. Inside the prison, the troops and some of the prisoners were reeling off rounds of semi-automatic munitions. Some of the bullet flashes could be seen coming out from the prison’s second
story window. As I was approaching the front door, I suddenly heard someone calling my name. I turned, and there was Irwin running toward the prison entrance.

I asked him if he was crazy. He pointed to the two press passes hanging around my neck and asked me to give him one. I gave him one. When he began to put on the pass, I realized that we do not actually look alike, and I told him so.

"We'll tell them we're brothers," he replied.

We worked together throughout the summer and helped to bring about some important arrests. These arrests, had they been properly handled by Haiti's Justice Department, could have easily resulted in indictments. Our work led to more arrests than those obtained by the Haitian government regarding Izmery's murder.

It is deplorable that neither the previous government (for not pushing harder) nor the present government (for not following through) have seen the importance of providing some semblance of justice, or a certain degree of closure, to a people who yearn to break away from the past. I still hope that one day Haitian officials will use the work that the Irwin Stotzkys, the Michael Ratners, the Ira Kurzbans, and many others, have done to satisfy the desiderata of a people that do not deserve less.

Irwin's experiences in Haiti will be chronicled in a book called *Silencing the Guns in Haiti: The Promise of Deliberative Democracy*, which will be published in the near future.

Irwin's engagement in the human rights struggle is not limited to Haiti. He has traveled to various Latin American countries, notably Argentina, where he taught and wrote about democracy and human rights. Back in the mid-seventies, he, along with other attorneys, became involved in defending the rights of Haitians to obtain political asylum during a string of brutal military regimes that followed the sanguineous thirty-year reign of Duvaliers. Irwin reminds us everyday that we are indeed our brothers and sisters' keepers.
So, Irwin, the professor, the author, the attorney, and my friend, it is an honor. Congratulations on your well-deserved award!