

Picking Fights, Dropping Names

Norman Podhoretz looks back at the fierce, argumentative parties of New York's intelligentsia.

By JOHN LELAND

"These parties I mentioned," Norman Podhoretz said the other day, "everybody gave parties. And there was a lot of drinking. Some visiting literary celebrity would show up, Partisan Review would make a party or I would make a party. Everybody came. And it was a really passionate intellectual life. It's hard to imagine today, but people ac-

tually came to blows over literary disagreements."

It was a cold morning, and Mr. Podhoretz, 87, was recently back from the hospital after minor surgery, recuperating in his Upper East Side apartment, recalling a time in the middle of the last century when a small group of New York intellectuals held the public attention like well-read Kardashians.

"In the case of 'The Adventures of Augie March,' I was the one who nearly came to blows," he said, referring to a 1953 critical review he wrote of Saul Bellow's breakthrough novel. "Bellow wouldn't speak to

LIONS OF NEW YORK

The Ex-Radical

me for years. It was only when he decided he couldn't stand Alfred Kazin anymore that we became sort of friendly.

"We were sitting together in a meeting, Saul and I, and Kazin was over there, and he said, 'Look at him, he looks like he just ate a pastrami sandwich out of a stained brown
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Norman Podhoretz in his apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan last month. For many decades, the writer has ferociously debated literature, politics, ball fields and social status.

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piece of paper.' To incur Saul Bellow's wrath was dangerous."

Thus the passion of Norman Podhoretz: son of Brooklyn, employer of James Baldwin and Susan Sontag, former leftist, qualified supporter of Donald J. Trump. For the better part of nine decades, he has been a master of the New York feud, over literature, politics, ball fields or social status.

If you think he has let old grudges lie, think again.

"John Berryman, who was a friend of Bellow's, came up to me — I didn't know who he was, this drunken guy — and he said, 'We'll get you for that review if it takes 10 years.' I was 23 years old. I go, 'What?'"

Mr. Podhoretz, who ran Commentary magazine from 1960 to 1995, has now outlived most of his old adversaries, including those he chronicled in his 1999 memoir "Ex-Friends: Falling Out With Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt and Norman Mailer." Smart, ambitious, argumentative, backstabbing, front-stabbing, he is a living amalgam of New York ego and intellect.

His story is also one of sweeping political reversal. Born in 1930 in a modest Jewish immigrant Brooklyn home, he made his mark in liberal Manhattan, broke ranks with the friends who nourished him and became a shaper of the neoconservative movement. Even before the break, Mailer, one of his closest friends, called his work "brutal — coarse, intimate, snide, grasping, groping, slaving, slippery of reference, crude and naturally tasteless." Mr. Podhoretz, needless to say, returned the compliment.

His first proving ground was the Brownsville, Brooklyn, of his childhood, where enclaves of Jews, Italians and African-Americans battled over turf. The young Norman juggled the identities of street kid and star pupil, taken under wing by a domineering teacher at Boys High School in Bedford-Stuyvesant who labored to cauterize his rough edges. In Brownsville, he said, one never backed down from a fight, because the consequences of backing down were more frightening than those of a mere beating.

"Brooklyn was a real culture," he said. "In Brooklyn in those days, every street corner had a candy store, and every candy store had a bunch of kids hanging around. Gangs. They weren't gangs like the Crips and the Bloods, but they were very fiercely protective of their own territory. I was in the Cherokees. I was not a great athlete, but I was the only one who was good in school, and they liked that."

"Whenever we'd run to East Flatbush to pick up girls, I'd lead the pack. Every one of these street gangs had a tummler, some guy who was funny. And some of them became Woody Allen. And some of them just went to work in the garment center."

For Mr. Podhoretz, the next step was Columbia University, where Lionel Trilling, a mentor, guided him in both literature and liberal ideology. Mr. Podhoretz lived with his parents, commuting across a distance, from Brooklyn to Manhattan, that was as vast culturally as it was geographically.

The Trillings brought Mr. Podhoretz into the world of New York intellectuals: Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Kazin, Murray Kempton, Irving Kristol, Mary McCarthy and Delmore Schwartz, among others. They were largely Jewish, Marxist, steered in marathon arguments at City College of New York. Mr. Podhoretz was a decade younger than most but just as quick to enter a debate, and as certain that he was right. Kempton called the group the Family, and Mr. Podhoretz popularized the name.

"I was a rising star in that world from 1953 onward," he said. "I was regarded as the brilliant young critic till Susan Sontag came along and eclipsed me, partly because of her looks, I can tell you." He added, "I'm not famous for my modesty, whether false or otherwise."

IN THIS COMPANY, he developed a critical style that would carry him through his career: not just advancing his own views but insisting that anyone who thought otherwise was deficient.

In those years, writers attacked one another first in the pages of so-called little magazines like Partisan Review and Commentary, and then at parties where politics and art were battlefields. If the players considered themselves high-minded, Mr. Podhoretz scathingly suggested other motives.

"Every morning," he wrote in the 1967 memoir "Making It," "a stock-market report on reputation comes out in New York. It is invisible, but those who have eyes to see can read it. Did so-and-so have dinner at Jacqueline Kennedy's apartment last night? Up five points. Was so-and-so not invited by the Lowells to meet the latest visiting Russian poet? Down one-eighth. Did so-and-so's book get nominated for the National Book Award? Up two and five-eighths. Did Partisan Review neglect to ask so-and-so to participate in a symposium? Down two."

When he took over Commentary in 1960, at that time a stodgy organ for the American Jewish Committee, he swung it to the left, hiring writers like Baldwin, Mailer, Paul Goodman and Norman O. Brown. Sontag worked under him briefly as an editorial assistant.

His own early writing, including a widely read 1963 essay called "My Negro Problem — And Ours," which disparaged integration but encouraged miscegenation, offered "something to offend everyone," he said. No matter: It staked out a point of view, and it got attention.

Mr. Podhoretz's son, John Podhoretz, who now edits Commentary, recalled visits to his

Friends and Adversaries

Back when liberals and conservatives talked to each other, Norman Podhoretz knew everyone in town. And he sparred with them all.



Paul Goodman
Wrote for Commentary



Lauren Bacall
Actress



James Baldwin
Wrote for Commentary



Daniel Patrick Moynihan
Sociologist and politician



Lillian Hellman
Playwright, ex-friend



Lionel Trilling
Mentor, ex-friend



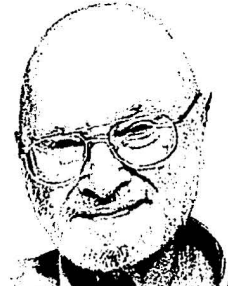
Jason Epstein
Editor, publisher, ex-friend



Jacqueline Kennedy
Socialite



Norman Mailer
Novelist, ex-friend



Jules Feiffer
Cartoonist, ex-friend



Murray Kempton
Writer, coined "the Family"



Susan Sontag
Critic, rival



Saul Bellow
Novelist



Alfred Kazin
Literary critic



Hannah Arendt
Philosopher, ex-friend

family's rent-controlled apartment on West 105th Street from Mailer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who were "like uncles," he said. "My sister Ruthie remembers this funny guy spinning a plate on his nose, and it was Edmund Wilson."

Ruthie Blum, who is now a journalist, remembered tending bar at her parents' parties when she was 9 or 10, finishing the glasses that guests left around. "These were parties that went on all night," she said. "We had a huge apartment with a concert grand piano in the living room, in a roach-infested building in a dangerous neighborhood."

The writer and cartoonist Jules Feiffer, 88, who was friendly with Mr. Podhoretz until they fell out, said he was "amazed at how these people loved to raise their voices and fight with each other."

"They loved to argue," Mr. Feiffer continued. "Sometimes they even listened to each other. They were extraordinary. I was a cartoonist, and they were larger than life. It was an amazing period which you thought would go on forever, and then suddenly it was over."

At a party for the theater critic Kenneth Tynan, he recalled Mr. Podhoretz's trying to get the attention of Lauren Bacall, who was huddled with the actress Arlene Francis. Bacall turned on him: "Butt out, buster, I'm talking to one of my peers."

"Wonderful!" Mr. Feiffer said. "Norman was stunned. If that had happened to me, I would have shut up about it. He went around telling everybody. He had his own status in his group, and this was not his group."

Feuds simmered and festered. Everyone published books and reviewed one another in Partisan Review, Commentary and The New York Review of Books. A negative review in one begot a retaliatory review in another, as well a snub at a party — all very public, especially once Mrs. Kennedy started cultivating the Family. Mr. Podhoretz's status at Commentary earned him a place at her soirees and an invitation to Truman Capote's Black and White Ball in 1966, often called the party of the century.

When Mr. Podhoretz had a falling out with Jason Epstein, a founder of The New York Review, The New York Times Magazine ran a 1972 article, "Why Norman and Jason Aren't Talking," that stretched over 10 pages.

Mr. Podhoretz by then was swinging politically to the right, repelled by what he saw as an anti-American strain within the coun-

terculture. "They started spelling America with a K," Mr. Podhoretz said. Kristol, Moynihan, Bell and a few others had already moved right, arguing that the war on poverty and social welfare programs were hurting the poor. To their domestic neoconservatism, Mr. Podhoretz brought an emphasis on strong foreign policy and military interventionism.

Others hewed steadfastly to the left. By the mid-1970s, this split, which played out in the same magazines that had earlier sealed their friendships, divided Mr. Podhoretz from nearly all of his old companions. To this day, he said, he has not spoken with Mr. Epstein in nearly 40 years.

"There was so much anger," John Podhoretz said.

Ms. Blum added: "My father is a social animal who loved society and loved his friends. Imagine how hard that is — to have to choose what you believe in over being everybody's darling, or being praised."

The elder Mr. Podhoretz, noting the caliber of minds he had alienated, wrote, "I have often said that if I wish to name-drop, I have only to list my ex-friends."

BY THEN, THOUGH, the New York intellectuals were losing their place in the American consciousness. In part it was because they were champions of high culture at a time when the distinction between high and popular culture began to seem anachronistic.

From within, Sontag had written the 1966 collection of essays "Against Interpretation," a blow to the critics who were high priests of interpretation. And from without had come the challenge of the Beat generation and 1960s counterculture, whom Mr. Podhoretz derided as "Know-Nothing Bohemians," but who reflected the national mood more dynamically than the New York intellectuals. The entertainment industry captured some intellectuals, the cocoon of the university captured others.

Mr. Podhoretz, too, moved on to other battles. By the time Ronald Reagan became president in 1980, the fractious literary critic was an influential voice in Washington, especially for his writings against the Soviet Union.

Yet through it all, his allegiances remained in New York, even during the city's violent years, for which he blamed liberals. He moved from the Upper West Side when "the kids started getting mugged," he said, and more recently gave up driving, in a concession to his age.

"I still love the sight of the skyline flying

'I was regarded as the brilliant young critic till Susan Sontag came along and eclipsed me, partly because of her looks, I can tell you. I'm not famous for my modesty, whether false or otherwise.'

in," he said. "I'm a New Yorker. I don't think I could live comfortably anywhere else. I'm used to the habits and customs of the city. It means I don't know my next-door neighbor. I've been here 38 years. I know the doormen very well, but I don't know the neighbors. Of course, most of the neighbors think I'm a fascist, so they're perfectly happy not to know me."

"I think there are a few secret conservatives in the building. I call them Marranos. The Marranos were the Jews that converted to Christianity but continued to practice Judaism in the cellar. It was a dirty name. They're the ones that smile at me in the elevator."

At the same time, he has clung unyieldingly to a belief that without Rudolph W. Giuliani as mayor, the city is no longer the safe place it once was. He considers Mayor Bill de Blasio a Sandinista and a "bum," and maintains, contrary to reports, that crime is up, though he allowed, "I couldn't make a very good case for you."

These days, Mr. Podhoretz rarely leaves his Upper East Side apartment; at home with his wife of 60 years, the writer Midge Decter, he gets around using a walker because of spinal stenosis. The high-end stereo that dominates the living room has gone idle since the death of their daughter Rachel Abrams in 2013. "My parents have gone downhill physically and emotionally since her death," Ms. Blum said.

After supporting Marco Rubio in the Republican presidential primaries, Mr. Podhoretz took a position that was not so much an endorsement of Mr. Trump as a rebuttal to conservatives who opposed him. "I was anti-anti-Trump," he said. "I said it was a choice of evils, and he was the lesser evil. And I still think that's true, although it might turn out that he wasn't evil at all. He has the most conservative cabinet since Reagan, more than Reagan. So I watch what he does more than what he says." He was not put off by Mr. Trump's conciliatory approach to Russia, nor his support from white nationalists, whom he considered too marginal to be a real threat.

AS FOR THE INTELLECTUAL WORLD that had nourished him, he said, it was a product of another time. "Nobody cares that much anymore. We really cared. Art had become a kind of religion, I mean a substitute for religion. And works of art were sacred objects. A great work of art had to be revered. Susan Sontag went and spent a whole night sitting at the tomb of George Balanchine, who was being laid in state. Think about that for a minute. It's like going to a saint. And Susan was one of the worst — worst in the sense that she was one of the worshippers of art. I guess there are still people who argue about, is David Foster Wallace a great writer? Which he isn't. I don't know."

Four decades after the Family faded, what is most striking about them may not be their brilliance, but that they aired their ideas in the presence of equal resistance: liberals in the presence of conservatives, modernists in the presence of traditionalists. Fragmented media have made such airings unnecessary. Mr. Podhoretz, in the comfort of his New York home, need not cultivate a new generation of ex-friends.

"My view of life is, most people mind their own business," he said. "They go to make a living, they got marriages, they got kids. And only a small minority of people venture forth into things that don't have a direct bearing on their lives." After the battles of the 1960s and '70s, he said, the air has gone out of such disputation.

"All Americans really care about is sports," he said. "They pretend to care about other things, but what they care about is sports."

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GERT DEHLINGER

Commentary's editors in 1966, from left: Theodore Solotaroff; Marion Magid; Norman Podhoretz.

Lions of New York

Articles in this series are profiling New Yorkers who, in response to the crises of the 1970s and '80s, helped shape the city's renaissance.

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