

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 30 – Philip Blumenthal – Family Legacy

Photographs on A Wall

And now a personal word,

I interviewed Philip Blumenthal in a conference room beside his office. I was immediately struck by the images on the wall: portraits of Philip's father, Herman Blumenthal, and his uncle, I.D. Blumenthal, and black-and-white photographs of his grandparents and ancestors in Orthodox religious garb. I sensed the tradition and legacy of the family, the stories and expectations passed on, the history of entrepreneurship and faith and philanthropy.

I thought of my own father and how much he might have in common with Philip. My dad was similarly born to a successful Jewish family with a notable last name. In the late 1800s, during the first Amazon rubber boom, when the extraction and commercialization of rubber transformed the Amazon basin, Sephardic Jews from Morocco and Gibraltar joined waves of Europeans who migrated to the Amazon rain forest to find their fortune. Jewish immigrants brought with them their education and religion and entrepreneurial drive. I can imagine the negotiation of cultures as these European North African Jews found their way among Brazilians and indigenous populations in patches of clearing that became urbanized small towns beside one of the mightiest rivers on the planet in the lush heat and verdant density of the tropics.

My grandfather, Isaac Jose Peres, became a landowner and merchant in the town of Itacoatiara, near the city of Manaus, operating a business that extracted latex from rubber trees that he shipped to Europe and later to North America. My grandfather was among those civic leaders and prominent men of the rubber industry who brought electricity and running water and modern amenities to the region. He contributed to arts and culture, to roads and infrastructure, to the honoring and preservation of the Jewish community. A lifelong philanthropist, he became mayor of his city in 1926, and during his tenure, he embarked on an environmental and beautification program, including a grand avenue that was later named after him that people visit to this day.

My grandfather had many children. My father, Ambrosio Benchimol Peres, was his youngest son. My dad was interested in the success of the family enterprise but not in joining the business. Instead, he was interested in traveling the world and forging his way in the United States. My father emigrated to New York in 1954. He met my mom, a Roman Catholic young woman nineteen years younger than him, on a return visit to

Brazil in 1955. They met at a Carnival party in the northern Brazilian city of Sao Luis. They married that year, she moved with him back to New York, and their journey as Brazilian-Americans began. They would move from New York to New Orleans to San Francisco, where I was born in 1962.

My father occasionally went to temple on the high holy days, but he did not practice Judaism. My brother and sisters and I were all raised Roman Catholic by my mom. But our household was Jewish in temperament, at least to the extent that we valued learning and education and good storytelling and hard work. I love that my last name is Peres.

All those memories and feelings came back when I saw the photographs of generations of the Blumenthal family in Philip's conference room. Philip and his family have made remarkable and lasting contributions to our region. We are so much better as a community when legacies are created and traditions of generosity are passed on.

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