



## **Richard Polenberg**

July 21, 1937 – November 26, 2020

Richard Polenberg (Dick to his friends and colleagues) died at the age of 83 on November 26, 2020. It was Thanksgiving Day, an appropriate reminder of the gratitude owed to him by his colleagues and by the many thousands of Cornell students he taught. Born on July 21, 1937, Professor Polenberg grew up in New York City where one of his proudest memories was working as an intern for Mad Magazine. He received his Ph.D. in 1964 from Columbia University under the direction of William Leuchtenburg, a distinguished scholar of the New Deal and a Cornell alumnus. Before coming to Ithaca in 1966, Professor Polenberg taught at his alma mater Brooklyn College.

Professor Polenberg's career at Cornell spanned 46 years. Chair of the History Department from 1977 to 1980, he became the Goldwin Smith Professor of History in 1986. When he retired in 2012, he was the Marie Underhill Noll Professor of History. Professor Polenberg loved Ithaca and did not relish travel. The world that most contented him stretched from his spacious home on Orchard Place to his offices in McGraw Hall and Sterling Library. Nonetheless, he traveled, however reluctantly, to lecture at other universities in the United States and abroad. In 1988-89, Professor Polenberg served as the Fulbright Visiting Professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Those are the bare facts of his career. They do not do justice to his legendary role as a teacher of undergraduate and graduate students or to his influence as a historian of twentieth-century America. He lectured, without notes, to classes exceeding an enrollment of 1000. Only Bailey Hall had adequate seating. He loved his small seminars as well, which were always oversubscribed. Professor Polenberg was determined to learn and remember the names of the Cornellians who took his classes. It helped that a large number of them kept in touch with him after they graduated and sought him out over reunion weekends. He received the Clark Teaching Award very early in his career, and later was honored as a Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow.

For Professor Polenberg, teaching was a stimulus to his work as a scholar. His publications

began with a study of the New Deal, Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government (1966). His next book grew from his interest in anarchism and in free speech. Fighting Faiths, The Abrams Case, the Supreme Court Speech (1988) won the American Bar Associations Silver Gavel Award. A continued interest in constitutional history, joined to an interest in American Judaism, resulted in The World of Benjamin Cardozo. Personal Values and Judicial Process (1997). Professor Polenberg joined these monuments of scholarship to publications that sought a broader audience. Combining his powers of synthesis to his gift for narration, he produced War and Society, The United States, 1941-1945 (1972); One National Divisible: Class, Race and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938 (1980); and with Professor Walter LaFeber, another renowned Cornell teacher and historian, The American Century. A History of the United States from 1890 to the Present (1975). The latter, in two volumes, is now in its seventh edition.

Professor Polenberg's interest in teaching and scholarship did not end with his retirement. He became an enthusiastic participant in Cornell's teaching project at the Auburn Correctional Facility. Letters addressed to him from incarcerated students were as appreciative as those he received from Cornell students. They were to him a source of great pride.

In retirement, he also pursued his life long interest in blue grass and American folk music, especially music of political protest. A skilled guitarist and banjo player, combined with his soft voice, led, almost by chance, to an opportunity to sing and play with Pete Seeger at the latter's home on the Hudson River. It was only appropriate that his last book, published in 2015, was Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales that Inspired "Stagolee," "John Henry, and other Traditional American Folk Songs.

His final book underscored Professor Polenberg's talent for telling a captivating story. That ability was clear whether he was bringing alive a historical incident or relating an event in his own life, like the time he met former vice president Henry Wallace or introduced Alger Hiss to a large Cornell audience.

Those who knew Professor Polenberg will always remember his calm kindness, his wit, and his fierce integrity. Part of his nature was a determination to defend those whom he saw as victims of injustice, whether it was Emma Goldman, J. Roger Oppenheimer, or an undergraduate subjected to sexual harassment.

For many years Professor Polenberg played tennis, and he liked to win. That did not keep him from regularly calling his opponent's ball "in" when it was clearly "out." He was stubborn, and that was a weakness. It was more than compensated by the strongest component in his makeup. That was empathy.

Almost every Saturday, he could be seen at Temple Beth-El in Ithaca, where he served three terms as its president. Devoted to his family, he is survived by Joan Speilhotz, his wife of 27 years, his four children, and his seven grandchildren.

*Written by Larry Moore*