

Writer Budd Schulberg, unrepentant informer, dead at 95

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Writer Budd Schulberg, author of *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), a well-known novel about the film industry, and the screenplay for *On the Waterfront* (1954), died in Westhampton, New York on August 5 at the age of 95.

Schulberg was a member of the Communist Party in the late 1930s and subsequently “named names,” those of fellow writers and others who had also been CP members, before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in May 1951. To the end of his life he defended his informing, and that experience largely defines his legacy.

Schulberg was born in New York City, but raised in Hollywood, where his father, B. P. Schulberg, was an executive at Paramount in the 1920s and 1930s. Budd Schulberg gives an account of his childhood in *Moving Pictures: Memories of a Hollywood Prince* (1981). His father, he writes in the book, was “a political liberal in the reactionary world of [Louis B.] Mayer and [William Randolph] Hearst,” and his mother maintained her “Lower East Side [of Manhattan] ‘socialism,’” even while the family lived in relative luxury in southern California. To such influences Schulberg ascribed his “childhood rooting for underdogs.”

His mother, the wife of a successful movie executive, became one of the innumerable “friends of the Soviet Union” after the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy. She traveled to the USSR in 1931 and gave a glowing account on her return. Schulberg, who had long since become a devoted anti-communist by the time he wrote his memoir, describes his mother as “Joe Stalin’s advance-woman.”

Schulberg drifted into Communist Party circles in Hollywood in the late 1930s. Those circles were extensive, and included some very talented and dedicated people. However, by no stretch of the imagination could the organization he joined be described as Marxist. Schulberg, speaking of the time, commented: “Once we were told that we could be communists and still support the New Deal and Roosevelt, and that the CP was simply a more advanced group going in the same general direction, it was pretty heady and convincing stuff to us.” (*The Hollywood Writers’ Wars*) One could be a “progressive” and an “anti-fascist,” without coming into conflict with the pro-Roosevelt forces.

Concerned by the conditions of the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, but not equipped with a socialist (or any kind of profound) perspective on American society, the left reformist milieu turned for sustenance to the Soviet regime and leaned on its authority in the late 1930s. Schulberg and countless others joined the CP during the years the leadership of the Bolshevik Party was being exterminated by Stalin and his associates in show trials and by other means of mass repression.

The contradictions of the situation were not Schulberg’s fault, but the description of “Marxist study groups” meeting at “B.P. Schulberg’s house in Benedict Canyon [in the exclusive Hollywood Hills],” hosted by the younger Schulberg’s wife, Virginia, is suggestive. As one participant notes, “I think we couldn’t deny the appeal of meeting in a fine Beverly Hills house to talk of revolution with such a glamorous young hostess.”

(Ibid)

Schulberg came into conflict with the CP officialdom in Hollywood over the writing of his novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?* Victor Navasky, in *Naming Names*, notes that in his 1951 HUAC testimony, Schulberg claimed that the Stalinists in the film industry had “tried to influence his writings ... [and] from 1937 to 1939 Party members had criticized his short stories. He told them he was going to write a book, that was acceptable, because books could be ‘useful weapons,’ but when he told them his plan to convert his 1937 *Liberty* magazine short story, ‘What Makes Sammy Run?’ into a novel, ‘The reaction ... was not favorable ... The feeling was that this was a destructive idea; that ... it was much too individualistic; that it didn’t begin to show what were called the progressive forces in Hollywood; and that it was something they thought should be either abandoned or discussed with some higher authority ... before I began to work on it.’”

Schulberg, instead, took off to the country and wrote his book. *What Makes Sammy Run?* is a vigorous, but fairly crude account of the rise of a Hollywood huckster, Sammy Glick, from humble surroundings in New York City to the heights of the entertainment industry. Glick uses and abuses numerous people en route. He is a congenital liar, manipulator, and plagiarist. The novel, along the way, also provides a fictional account of the early years of the Screen Writers Guild and its struggles with the studio bosses.

This passage, following the narrator’s visit to Glick’s family back in New York (Rivington Street is on the Lower East Side), gives something of the novel’s overall flavor:

“I thought of Sammy Glick rocking in his cradle of hate, malnutrition, prejudice, suspicions, amorality, the anarchy of the poor; I thought of him as a mangy little puppy in a dog-eat-dog world. I was modulating my hate for Sammy Glick from the personal to the societal. I no longer even hated Rivington Street but the idea of Rivington Street, all Rivington Streets of all nationalities allowed to pile up in cities like gigantic dung heaps smelling up the world, ambitions growing out of filth and crawling away like worms. I saw Sammy Glick on a battlefield where every soldier was his own cause, his own army and his own flag, and I realized that I had singled him out not because he had been born into the world any more selfish, ruthless, and cruel than anybody else, even though he had become all three, but because in the midst of a war that was selfish, ruthless and cruel Sammy was proving himself the fittest, the fiercest and the fastest.”

Schulberg may very well have objected to the Stalinists’ desire to control his words, but he owed them more than a little debt. While *What Makes Sammy Run?* is not a “proletarian” novel, or an example of “socialist realism,” it is flatly and obviously written, and bears the influence of those retrograde trends. It is not a deeply convincing or affecting book.

Still, the novel’s unflattering portrait of the film industry, in its opportunism and corruption, brought the wrath of the studios down on the author’s head (and his father’s too). The CP also sharply criticized the

work after it appeared, further alienating Schulberg from the Stalinists.

His disenchantment with the Communist Party in the 1940s was as inevitable, given the general social and cultural circumstances, as had been his initial attraction. In April 1951 screenwriter and former CP member Richard Collins, in testimony before HUAC, named Schulberg, along with 25 others, as someone he knew to have been a member of the party.

Schulberg fired off the following telegram to the witch-hunters: "I have noted the public statement of your committee inviting those named in recent testimony to appear before your committee. My recollection of my communist affiliation is that it was approximately from 1937 to 1940. My opposition to communists and Soviet dictatorship is a matter of record. I will co-operate with you in any way I can."

In fact, as the writer noted during his testimony before the committee a month later, he had "voluntarily made known" his status to an "investigative agency of the federal government" (i.e., the FBI presumably) prior to his being named by Collins. In other words, Schulberg actively sought the opportunity to inform. One cannot even say the same about director Elia Kazan, another of the prominent Hollywood informers.

Following Kazan's appearance before HUAC in January and April 1952, the pair fell into one another's arms. *On the Waterfront*, after numerous rewritings of the script, was the result (they later worked together on *A Face in the Crowd* [1957]). The former film, starring Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint, tells a story about waterfront union corruption and the courageous individual (Brando), a longshoreman and former boxer, who eventually stands up to the mob. As we noted in February 1999, at the time of the decision by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to bestow an honorary award on Kazan:

"Kazan and screenwriter Budd Schulberg, also a HUAC informer, made the film in large measure to justify their own actions. In his autobiography Brando makes two remarkable claims: first, that 'I did not realize then ... that *On the Waterfront* was really a metaphorical argument' by Kazan and Schulberg 'to justify finking on their friends'; second, that when shown the completed film, 'I was so depressed by my performance I got up and left the screen room. I thought I was a huge failure.' The film stands up, despite its reactionary and self-serving theme, primarily because of the performances of Brando and Eva Marie Saint and its overall grittiness. It also has an extraordinary score by Leonard Bernstein.

"The notion, however, that *On the Waterfront* captures metaphorically the truth of Kazan's relationship to the Communist Party, on the one hand, and HUAC, on the other, is fanciful, as is the idea that the film somehow brings out the 'dilemma' facing the potential informer. Where is the 'moral ambiguity' in [character Terry] Malloy's position that Kazan has referred to on various occasions? If Brando's character does not speak to the authorities and seek their protection, he is likely to be rubbed out. He is fighting for his life and has no choice, within the framework established by the film's creators, but to turn on his former associates. Kazan and Schulberg have stacked the deck entirely in their favor.

"How do the fictional circumstances in *On the Waterfront* resemble the reality of the early 1950s in the US? In turning informer, it was Kazan who joined a political lynch mob. The Communist Party was not simply synonymous with its Stalinist leadership and program. It contained devoted and self-sacrificing individuals, who believed they were fighting for progressive social change. Terry Malloy's traumatic experiences have more in common with those endured by the actors, directors and writers who *faced the blacklist* than with those who accepted and profited from it.

"If Kazan had made '*On the Set*' instead, about a well-paid and successful director who cravenly surrendered to right-wing political forces, would it have had the same resonance? (Brando's failure to see any connection between Kazan's informing and his own character's

behavior is comprehensible precisely because the situation set up in the film is so at odds with the director's actual circumstances. Indeed, the strength of the film is that one would not regard it as a defense of cowardice and opportunism without a knowledge of the historical and personal facts.)"

Schulberg spent the remaining half a century and more of his life defending his swinish conduct. He claimed on numerous occasions that his action was justified by the "totalitarian" character of the CPUSA, which he described as "a splinter in the heart of the United States." Schulberg asserted that the tragic fate of the Soviet artists motivated him to testify against his former comrades. It should be noted, however, that during the period of the Moscow Trials he never opened his mouth in defense of Trotsky or any other of the defendants, or the artists, for that matter, and that his conflict with the CP, in his own words, came over changes demanded in his novel.

In 1999, we also responded to the claim that he and the other informers had merely been "premature anti-Stalinists":

"The genuine anti-Stalinists, as anyone who has studied the history of this century knows, were the Trotskyists, and they did not discover the cause in 1952. Trotsky and his co-thinkers fought for the regeneration of the Soviet regime and the Communist International from 1923 until 1933, when the latter organization's worthlessness from the point of view of social revolution became manifest, and thereafter for political revolution in the USSR and the building of a new socialist international. Their opposition to Stalinism was of a Marxist character, an opposition from the left. They explained that the regime in the Soviet Union had betrayed the October Revolution and that its crimes did not result from the growth of socialism in the USSR, but from its opposite, the growth of tendencies that would lead to the restoration of capitalism. Subsequent events have vindicated that view.

"Marxists in the USSR by the tens of thousands paid for their opposition to the bureaucratic dictatorship with their lives. On the other hand, many of the social types who had denounced the Bolshevik-led revolution in 1917, with its perspective of world revolution, flocked to support the Stalin regime in the 1930s, precisely because it had abandoned the path of social revolution. One has only to remember the support given by such respected liberal organs as the *New York Times* and the *Nation* to the infamous Moscow purge trials of the late 1930s.

"Schulberg's notion that oppressed Soviet artists would be served by the strengthening of the American state rested on a fundamental political lie: that American 'democracy' and Stalinist 'totalitarianism' were deadly enemies. This vulgar, false and self-serving notion served to justify a whole host of perfidious deeds during the Cold War. Schulberg never bothered to explain how ceding the struggle against totalitarianism to Joseph McCarthy, John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, the CIA, the FBI and the US military would advance the cause of human liberation."



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