

# Henry M. Silvert, PhD, Champion for Social Justice

from **Morrie Sherry Silvert**

Henry M. Silvert, lifelong champion of human rights worldwide, finally defied the exclamation of his childhood doctor—“This boy doesn’t know how to die!”—uttered after young Henry sailed off a cliff in Mexico in 1955 at age six, along with a secretly suicidal graduate student at the wheel. He wound up in a two-and-a-half-months-long coma. The driver died that night. Most feared Henry would never wake up. But wake up he did. And then young Henry had to fight through pain and fog to relearn everything he’d known, from how to speak to how to walk.

The young Silvert had lots of encouragement from his politically active parents, eminent Latin Americanist and political scientist Kalman H. Silvert, and sociologist and author Frieda M. Silvert, who continued to host dinner parties in New York for Latin American political dignitaries after her husband’s death. Neither determined parent would brook any excuse. Nor would the hospital staff. Whenever Henry yelled “I don’t want to do that,” they all persisted until he agreed. And so young Henry began what was to be a basic part of his life, walking resolutely despite a perpetual limp, speaking clearly, and fighting for freedom.

Henry had always been a precocious child who played the violin and bridge, along with hide and seek. And he’d been trained early on the values of liberty. At the age of three, against his parents’ demurrals at a dinner party when a guest had insisted he sing a song, young Henry jumped on a chair and belted out “La Marseillaise,” theme of the French Revolution his mother had sung with him whenever they were in the kitchen together tidying up after meals his father or various cooks

put together with far more skill; his mother was notoriously lacking in that particular talent, according to Henry.

On December 10, 2021, after a long battle with adenoid cystic carcinoma, the younger Silvert finally succumbed. He was 73. But his life-affirming, joyous spirit lives on as a model of a life fully lived, even while overcoming drastic circumstances, in the memoir he did see published recently: *An Indelible Event and Detour Through a Global Childhood*, which won the IRWIN Award for Best Nonfiction Book of 2021 (Book Publicists of Southern California’s Industry Recognition of Writers in the News award). As D. Donovan, senior reviewer, *Midwest Book Review*, writes, “A life-threatening car accident may have changed his trajectory, but it didn’t defeat his attitude. Silvert grew into a political activist, employing a social inspection that embraced both his South American experiences and childhood and a growing optimism undaunted by the rigors of adversity.”

As a survey associate and statistician, Dr. Henry M. Silvert worked at The Conference Board for 23 years until his retirement, and coauthored numerous reports regarding business matters. He also worked on projects addressing, among other topics, childhood hunger, drug use, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He gave presentations at conferences on Chile’s return to democratic practices. As a visiting professor at the Colegio de Mexico, he taught comparative politics of Latin America, and taught various sociology courses as an adjunct professor in New York City as well. He was a member of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) and the American Sociological Association (ASA). Aside from his professional work in the field, Silvert never missed

an opportunity to speak with people from all backgrounds, and ages, about social issues of the day. He'd always impart wisdom infused with humor, not infrequently capping the moment with a sing-along of songs of social justice.

Prior to his professional accomplishments, Hank, as he was known to family and friends, was no stranger to controversy. In succeeding years in their new homes in New York City, where his father taught at NYU, and earlier in New Hampshire, while his father taught at Dartmouth College, Hank engaged in civil disobedience a number of times. One memorable moment came when then Governor Wallace came to Dartmouth to speak. Infuriated by the very idea that an avowed segregationist was running on a platform of "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," Hank, with a select group of protesters he and his family had joined, showed up wearing a white sheet with red letters reading, "Would you let Wallace marry your sister?" Law enforcement authorities asked, then ordered Hank to take off the sheet. He continually refused escalating levels of representatives of the law, quoting, quite articulately, the laws protecting the protesters' rights to demonstrate. Informed he must obey or be "thrown out" by an Alabama state trooper, Hank replied, "You are an Alabama cop and you have no jurisdiction in New Hampshire, so get away from me and leave me alone." A New Hampshire state trooper came over and told him he had to leave. Hank continued to explain why he did not have to comply to the series of state and local police trying to eject him. Finally, two cops prepared to escort him out of the room. Hank refused to walk out, sat down, went limp and was carried out. In his sheet. The speech was to be broadcast outside the auditorium. Hank could hear the announcer saying Wallace stopped speaking and left the podium.

Of returning relevance today, Hank spoke up at a draft board during the time of Vietnam. As he wrote in his book, he had no expectation he would pass, but "wouldn't miss the opportunity to report for the physical if you paid me." Living in Manhattan at the time, he was still legally registered as a resident of Vermont, so he drove up to report in at Woodstock, expecting to see

what "I had only heard about [the Vietnam War] from Arlo Guthrie's album, *Alice's Restaurant*." Looking over the application, once he and others were moved to the Army Induction Center in Manchester, New Hampshire, he asked the officer behind the desk to clarify a few organizations draftees needed to state they did not belong to, intended to weed out "undesirables." "I notice that the Ku Klux Klan of New Jersey is on the list, but the Ku Klux Klan of Alabama is not. Could you tell me why it is not listed?" The officer had no idea. Nor did he know why one Socialist organization was listed but not others. Hank concluded by announcing he could not sign papers he did not fully understand. He then stood up and sang Phil Ochs's "The Draft Dodger Rag." Every verse.

Silvert did his undergraduate and doctoral studies at New York University, earning his PhD in Sociology in 1986, and read for a Bachelor of Philosophy Degree in Latin American area studies at the University of Oxford. Born in Philadelphia in 1948, he spent his childhood years in New Orleans, Guatemala City, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires and lived in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Norwich, Vermont as a teenager, and finally New York City, where he spent most of his adult years until his recent passing.

Silvert is survived by his wife of forty years, Morrie Sherry; brother Benjamin and his wife, Andrea Weinstein; brother Alexander and his wife, Diana Warrington; niece Lea and nephews Che and Eli Silvert. He is predeceased by his nephew Kal. A celebration of Silvert's life will be held in the spring 2022.

Note: If you would like to make a charitable donation in memory of Henry M. Silvert, please go to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives website <https://alba-valb.org/giving-season-2021/> and direct it to ALBA's Teaching Institutes.

*An Indelible Event and Detour Through a Global Childhood: A Memoir* is available from Amazon.com: <https://www.amazon.com/Indelible-Detour-Through-Global-Childhood-ebook/dp/B093J8V6DN/> //