

Who was it said, "If the rich could find someone to die for them, the poor would make a good living"?

To Success and Good Friends

BY THOMAS J. COTTLE

Seventy-three-year-old Sam Fischman, while not a poor man, is certainly not rich, and is never going to be rich. Over and over he insists that this fact doesn't bother him, for he's had all the rich friends a man ever needed. But it takes no special sensitivity to recognize how disappointed he is with his own lack of success, and what he perceives as his son's preordained series of failures.

"What does it take," Sam asks solemnly, "to convince anybody that you don't want to be rich, that you don't even need to be middle class to feel in your heart that you're a good man? Nu, you tell people, I'm not totally happy, but I'm content enough. No, they come fighting back. You're not happy, Sam, you're a bitter man, Sam, you see yourself as a failure, why not admit it? You know, Sam, if just *once* you could admit to yourself you wanted a big life and settled for a small one, then maybe you could find a little peace in life."

In truth, Sam Fischman had always wanted to become a doctor; short of that, a pharmacist. His mother, Sophie, had longed for him to enter medical school. Born in Boston, she married Mendel Fischman, a man from Philadelphia whose basic idea of life was that Jews were driving themselves crazy because all they wanted out of life was success, success, success. The reason, Mendel always said, that Jews were hated in the world was because they'd step on anybody to become successful. "Oh sure, they were smart, smarter probably than most people. Look at the great humanitarian contributions Jews made. But that was no doing of theirs. That was in the genes. Bragging about being Jewish is like bragging about how your eyes were brown. Big deal. It's all in the genes."

"I'll tell you something else," Mendel Fischman was known to say, "if the Jews are hated all over the world, then they'll stop being so hated when they give up this idea they have to be so special, which means any way you cut it, successful. Marxists, Zionists, they're all cutting each other's throats. Who can yell the loudest, that's what it's all about. Me, I'll settle for good old-

fashioned hard-earned poverty. People in neighborhoods like these don't fight, and you know why? Because here you take care of everybody who needs help. Then, when everybody's taken care of, Jewish or not Jewish, then you've earned the right to go become successful because you know that nobody, maybe right through the walls, is suffering.

"Okay? But tell me," Mendel Fischman would conclude, "you got anybody in a poor neighborhood who can honestly look anybody else in the eye and say, well, as long as everybody's needs are taken care of, I'm going out to get rich? No, sir. Let people go out to make themselves successful, and you'll see war in these communities. You'll also see a lot of unhappy people, because they'll know in their heart they were wrong in what they were doing. They can say, look, I know people are suffering, but I'm a Jew, and a Jew has to go out and prove himself because everyone in the world is sitting around hoping he'll fail. Me, I'll take poverty. It keeps you living exactly the way God wanted you to be. People don't like it that way, they should move out!"

Anyone who knew Mendel Fischman knew this last phrase was meant for his wife, Sophie, who couldn't have disagreed more with her husband. "Just the opposite," she would argue. "Jews are supposed to succeed. They're meant to live only with Jews, in peace, and with self-respect. And you tell me how a Jew can gain self-respect more than by being successful. It's not enough for a Jew to become a doctor, he should be head of the department. A Jewish lawyer shouldn't work for a gentile lawyer; he's got to be the number one man. Even a pharmacist. He doesn't work for a department store, he runs his *own* business. You hear that Mendel? A self-respecting Jew! If I do anything for our son, I'll push him to become number one. I'll push him from behind to get up any hill that stands between him and top notch success. I'll even push you out of the way if I have to."

"You won't have to, Sophie," Mendel would demur in a tone of annoyance and self-pity. "I'll be long dead. You can just push, push, push your son right over my grave to the most *successful* grave in the world. He's going to die in the end anyway, so what's the big deal about being a success! You think St. Peter wants us after all we've said about *him*? You got a business, you know that, Sophie? You're running a success business with

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one client, and you got an idea you can't fail, and he can't fail. But you're wrong, Sophie. I know business better than you, and I know that they fail more times than not, and when they do, they leave people much worse off than when they started. You want examples of what I'm talking about, I'll give you examples as long as my arm. Take it from someone who loves you, don't push the boy so hard. If he makes it, he'll make it, if he doesn't, don't be upset. You may even be surprised, he could end up happy. How about that, Soph, you could have created a world's first: a happy Jew!"

"A happy Jew," Sophie would mumble. "What do you know about happiness or success, or Jewish philosophy, or raising children? You're like all the other down-and-out people of the world. You preach and philosophize because in your work you can't make it. Jew or no Jew, there are talkers and doers, and you're a talker. Sammy won't be that way. He'll be a doctor first, then a talker!"

Mendel would walk away rubbing his forehead. "All right, all right, you're the boss, Sophie."

If one listened to Sam Fischman recalling his parents' arguments, one would believe they never had pleasant conversations, only battles. His parents had ways of getting at each other, Sam reasoned, that must have given them some pleasure. Perhaps arguing over him was the only pleasure they ever knew, because between Mendel's lack of financial success and his unbending belief that women must not work outside the home, there was never enough money to provide his family with material pleasures. Yet, as Sam pointed out, the debate about how he should and should not be brought up produced a frightened and confused man. With any project Sam felt such a tugging at his heart, as he called it, that he could never complete what he started. The idea of becoming a doctor clearly pleased him, just as it excited his mother. But anytime he mentioned his plans to his father, he would see Mendel's face become contorted and watch him pull at the skin on the back of his hands. The message could not have been more precise. Becoming a doctor meant being successful, and rich, which meant associating only with the hoi polloi and forgetting your roots. It meant ending up another hated Jew, dying in a rich man's cemetery, an unhappy man. Sam Fischman had heard the arguments between his parents too many times. Their conflicts, overflowing with animosity, long ago were consecrated as part of his own personality. Their public wars had become his private ones, although it took him a long while to discern what it was that had stopped him from becoming a doctor when he realized it wasn't the shortage of money.

Sam Fischman became a salesman, first for a furniture company, then a toy company, then a wine company, then a hardware company. On and on it went like this. A few months he had work, for several months he was unemployed or—as the family always said, seeking to protect him—he would rest. Sam himself complained that he was overrested. Mostly he complained to the kindly Yankel Kanter, who moved into the apartment downstairs from him when Yankel first arrived from Germany after the war. All he ever wanted, Sam would

tell Yankel, was to have a steady job. It didn't have to pay that much, it only had to provide him, his wife and two children, and his mother, Sophie, who lived in an old people's home in Philadelphia, with a little money. "What's so wrong about that?" he would ask Yankel, who always let Sam sit in the soft brown armchair near the window. "Am I asking for too much? I'm trying to make a compromise between what my father wanted for me and what my mother wanted for me. Come on, Yankel. You hear me like nobody else hears me. Tell me where I've gone wrong. Do they think I like being poor? Does anybody think you ask God, 'God, do me a favor, make me poor. Take everything away from me.' Did we ask for the war, Yankel? You of all people know what it was. But does that mean if you aren't rich you have to go out and kill yourself?"

"You must never kill yourself," Yankel would answer softly.

"But advise me," Sam would continue, "I can honestly tell people you have to accept your fate? You know what they'd say."

Yankel would nod. His expression said, you're right, Sam, you're absolutely right.

"They'll say, Sam, you're sick. Sam, you need a psychiatrist. This isn't Russia, Sam. This is the United States of America. Here there's just one way you judge a man. You look at his house, his car, his family, and his job and you proclaim him a success or a failure. All right, Yankel, so I'm a failure, so big deal. I'm the worst thing anyone has ever invented! Sam Fischman being out of work, resting more than he's working, that's why America has serious economic problems?"

Yankel never stopped nodding. Sam loved to sit in the brown chair and talk to his friend. He didn't come to Yankel's home that often, despite the fact he lived only a floor away. There was no reason why Sam couldn't have knocked on Yankel's door three, four times a day. Didn't everybody else in the apartment house do that? Who else showed this sort of respect? If you had the impulse to talk with someone, you didn't telephone him. In the first place, there weren't telephones in many of the apartments, and in the second place, why call if you could drop in? Abe Rosen hadn't the slightest



reservation about knocking on Sam's door at any hour of the day or night. A former dentist who had lost enormous amounts of money in several ill-advised real estate deals, Abe constantly needed to talk to someone, and, as he knew Sam was home during the day, Sam became his favorite target. Abe rarely called on Yankel. Yankel was held in too much respect. He was more intelligent than the others, a bit older, and as Abe always said to Sam, although Sam hated the tone in which he said it, Yankel had been through so much.

Long ago, Sam Fischman had given up hope of convincing Abe Rosen that Yankel Kanter was not sitting in his house all day mourning, and in fact enjoyed being with people. But Abe always pushed Sam's words aside. "Call it whatever you want. I had lots of patients like him. I know their type."

"Their *type*!" Sam would say, repulsed by the word. "Just because he was a survivor doesn't make him one of a type. People are people, no matter what their history."

Abe would just smile and sigh: "Yes, Sam, everybody is special and unique and blessed. All the Jews are different, and all the gentiles are different, but I know Yankel's type. I've seen that type all my life. I didn't spend thirty years in the business, thirty-eight to be exact, and not learn something about people. You learn

a lot from people being their dentist. People forget that."

"If you learned so much," Sam erupted angrily one day on the stairs outside Yankel's door, "so how come you lost all your money in phony deals?"

Abe wasn't taken aback in the slightest by the remark. He held tightly to Sam's grocery bundle while Sam kept fishing through his pockets for his key, which was just a ploy to get Abe to carry the groceries up the stairs, since Sam always left his door unlocked. "I thought I knew what I was doing," Abe answered. "That's all. I knew all the men. I thought what they said made sense. What the hell, they ended up taking the same bath I did. They weren't crooks. One of them got so upset he died from it. Left his wife with a couple thousand bucks, that's all. Three years before she would have inherited a quarter of a million dollars. What the hell, it could have been worse. I could be dead. That's worse, ain't it Sammy, boy? I could be alive without friends. Huh? That's worse too, ain't it?"

"Depends," came Sam's reply from his front door. "Abe, be a doll, put the groceries in the kitchen, then we'll talk about being alive without friends. Maybe we'll call on Yankel too."

"Anything you like Sammy, boy. Anything you like." **WV**

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