

## **An Interview with Michael Munk**

By Jim Breithaupt

September, 2014

Let me start with the first of two mistakes that I made, the one resulting from a serious underestimation of the incline of the Southwest Hills in Portland.

Michael Munk had called the week before, obtaining my number from the Southwest Hills Residential League (SWHRL) newsletter where I am listed as the neighborhood “historian.” Michael was trying to track down additional information on his home at 3808 SW Mt. Adams Drive, a turn-of-the-century dwelling tucked away at the top of Council Crest. He hoped that I might know of sources of historical information about Portland homes that he hadn’t discovered. I wasn’t encouraging but he agreed to meet with me anyway the following Sunday afternoon.

Thinking I would make like a Portlander and bicycle to Michael’s house from mine on Edgewood Road, I pulled my bike out of the garage where it had been gathering dust since a move from Phoenix last November, wiped it off, pumped air into the tires, and oiled the chain. I strapped on my helmet and started the climb up Edgewood to Broadway Road. Making it only halfway up our hill on Edgewood, I had to stop to catch my breath. The bike, a single speed beach cruiser that I had bought a few years ago to ride to work in the flatlands of Phoenix, wasn’t designed for hill climbing. I gave up on the idea of pedaling non-stop and unceremoniously pushed the bike intermittently the rest of the way up the hills to Council Crest.

His house wasn’t easy to find. Using a google map that I had printed off and stuck in my back pocket, I still made a couple of wrong turns because the ink had smeared with the sweat of the hill climb. Michael had said over the phone that the house was unexceptional from the outside, something I took issue with once I found the address. Like several homes lining the slopes of the southwest hills, his sits below street level, reminding me of a road running along the banks of the Kokosing River in Ohio where I grew up. All of the houses on Lower Gambier Road were built on a steep slope down to the river, making only the smoke from their chimneys visible from the road above. I parked my bike (no need to lock it) and walked down the short path to the front door.

A wooden screen door, the kind you once found in the Midwest before the days of air-conditioning, designed to keep the bugs out while letting a little breeze in during the sultry days of summer, framed the interior darkness. I pressed the old-fashioned buzzer, one connected to wires that rang a bell, not today’s digital chime, and waited on the shadows within to answer.

“Is that you, Jim?” the spectre answered somewhere from above. “I’ll be right down.”

This is a trusting house, I thought.

Michael materialized as he stepped outside, like a negative that had just been removed from the developer and put in the stop bath. He was tall and brawny and enduring looking, like the house that

now seemed dwarfed behind him. We walked around the perimeter of his house as Michael pointed out some of the features: the side shingling, the gables that he believes were updated on the house in later years, the ceramic door numbers made and installed by WPA workers. He then invited me inside for a brief tour of the house before we began to talk about his home. The first thing I noticed inside was



“The Portland Red Guide,” the first book I bought on my first trip to Portland several years ago, sitting on a table in the entryway. The book chronicles the history of communism and socialism and the labor movement in Portland, a subject that always interests me. I knew that I was in good company. Save for a few windows on the back of the house, the interior was original. The dark wooden beams and staircase dating back to the early twentieth century were original. The walls were filled with art work of Northwest artists as well as period piece posters of Woody Guthrie and John Reed. This was my kind of place.

We decided to move outside, the day being sunny with a gentle breeze. Michael donned a sports cap to keep the glare out of his eyes. I had my notebook and pen, feeling a little like Jimmy Olsen, cub reporter. As we began to talk, I realized quickly that we were working at cross purposes. My subject after seeing the inside of the house was its occupant; his subject, the few gaps in his knowledge of the history of the home that he thought I might help close. As it turned out, Michael already had most of his story; I had just begun to learn about his.

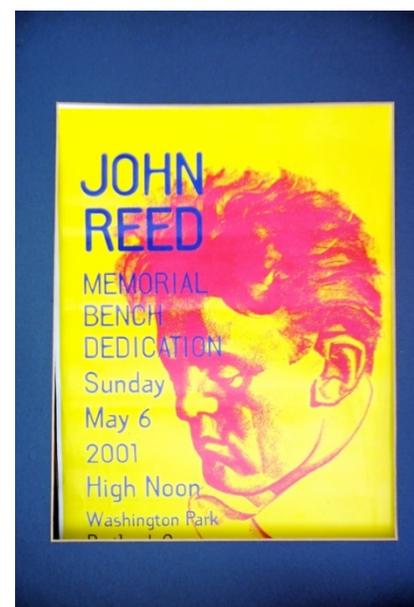
In my mind, the history of any home is incomplete without the story of those who have peopled it over the years. Knowing when a house was built is important, but I want to know whose hands laid the foundation. Where were the wood and stone found? Was someone born here? Or die? The standard questions can be answered quickly on the Internet once you know where to conduct your search, a trip to the library hardly seeming necessary any more unless you need to examine original source documents that have not been digitized and put on the internet. But what interests me more are those stories that are not as easy to come by, stories like the one Michael began to tell as the sun climbed over our heads.

First, I began asking about the Munk family and how they came to this country.

“Don’t you want to talk about the house?” he interjected.

Sure, but I steered him towards the history of his family.

The Munk family moved from Prague to Portland via London, England in 1939 at a time when “non-quota” visas to



escape the Nazi incursion were difficult to obtain. Arthur Scott, Michael's uncle on his mother's side,



was a professor of chemistry at Reed College and college president during the war years, and it was through his auspices that Frank obtained a visa to teach economics at Reed (prior to his emigration to the U.S., Frank had been an executive for a chain of department stores in Prague where he gained his business experience). The Munk family lived in a Reed faculty house when they first arrived, moving to Berkeley, then Washington D.C., finally returning to Portland in 1946. They purchased the family home on SW

Mount Adams drive in 1947, the home where Michael continues to live since his mother's death in 2000.

Michael's telling of the story was to the point, but I knew he had omitted much of the drama. I answered my own suspicions when I returned home and with a brief search on the internet discovered a longer, more dramatic, and much more harrowing story written by Michael's brother-in-law, Brooks Ragen. In 1999 Brooks presented the paper "Leaving Prague: A History of the Munks' Family Departure from Prague 1938-1939" to the Monday Club in Seattle, an organization associated with the University of Washington. That paper describes how the Munk family narrowly escaped Prague after Hitler's ultimatum to Czechoslovakia to surrender on March 15, 1939 (the day the German army crossed the Czech border). On April 9, 1939, Frank Munk wrote again to his brother-in-law Arthur Scott about the teaching contract that he needed to obtain the non-quota visas. His desperation grew after his wife, Nadia, took a large sum of money to a hotel where rumor had it that a clerk could procure the necessary Gestapo departure documents. She had returned home empty-handed after an uncomfortably long wait at the hotel. Suspecting that something was wrong, Nadia hurried home without the papers. She heard shortly thereafter that the hotel clerk had been arrested earlier in the day.

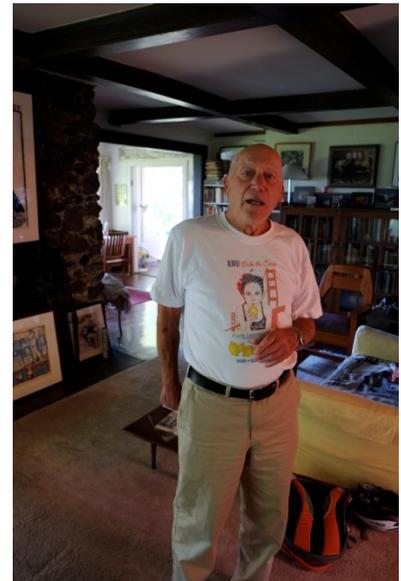
Fortunately, Beatrice Wellington, a woman "with no knowledge of these recent events and entirely on her own initiative," intervened on the Munks' behalf with a plan. Wellington had successfully gained permission for almost fifty Jewish children to leave Czechoslovakia and rejoin their parents in England. As Brooks quoted Frank Munk in the paper he presented to the Monday Club, "There was a Mrs. Munk going and we were all given as her children." With ages ranging from two to six, the Munk family managed to elude the Gestapo as they crossed the border because the ages on the permission documentation did not transfer to the gray cards issued by the Germans, just the Munks' names and passport numbers. They miraculously arrived at the Dutch coast after a harrowing inspection on the border. From the coast they took a two-hour ferry ride to Harwich England, hungry, penniless, but alive and safe thanks to the efforts of a Quaker from Vancouver, B.C.

I had to stop after reading about their escape from Prague, a cinematic series of events that in this case had a happy ending. I asked myself, how many similar stories end in human tragedy because there was no benefactor in a position to help? Thousands if not hundreds of thousands more. The home before me had been a safe harbor for one family who had the courage and good fortune to escape and sadly leave their homeland behind. Architectural plans simply do not tell this story.

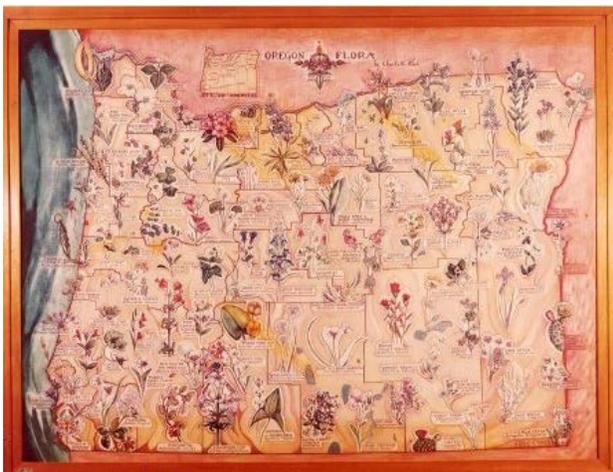
Having learned more about the Munks' story, I realized that Michael may not have felt comfortable sharing the details for personal reasons. Perhaps friends and relatives in Prague were not as fortunate. Or maybe Michael simply wanted to focus on the history of the house and leave the rest behind. Such history, unfortunately, cannot be forgotten if one believes that history through its telling can help prevent us from allowing such atrocities as the Holocaust to reoccur.

I sensed that Michael was ready to move on to a discussion of the house. He had accommodated my curiosity and it was now my turn to get to the purpose he had in mind: the minor gaps in his knowledge of the home where several generations of the Munk family had lived. This is what he knew.

The first mention of that house is found in the 1907-1908 "Book of Blocks" according to which building lots then lined the east side of the street. A Theodore Bernhein is listed as owning the lot but whether a house sat on it at that time is unclear, Bernhein having owned several properties in the area. In 1914, it is documented that a house did exist on the property, owned by Elbert Hoisington. Other research shows that Hoisington was listed in 1910 as a salesman at Sherman Clay. By 1914 he was a manager at Provident Trust Co. and by 1915 a business principal at the Salmon Columbia Land Company. The house number originally read 962 Mt. Adams Drive but by the early thirties when Portland began readdressing properties by the now familiar quadrant system, the address was changed to the current 3808 SW Mount Adams Drive. Michael believes that hundreds of WPA workers distributed the ceramic numbers such as the ones over the front door of the Munk family residence (other factors being the growth of Portland's city boundaries).



The home changed hands in 1922 when Robert Mish, a department manager at the Portland Machy Co, occupied the house with his daughter Charlotte. Charlotte became a well-known WPA painter and also a founding member of the Animal Defenders League of Oregon. She was a pupil of Frank V. DuMond at the Art Students League NY, and a Fine Arts graduate of the University of Southern California. Known for her industrial and marine landscapes and portraits, her work included documentary shipyard paintings for President Franklin Roosevelt and industrialist



Oregon Flora, by C. Mish

Henry J. Kaiser. One of her murals of Oregon Flora is displayed in the State Library in Salem; another could be viewed at the Albina Shipyards in Portland, now a defunct and toxic site blamed for sediments such as lead and zinc in the Willamette River. Her work was also in the old Congress Hotel at Sixth and Main until the building was replaced with the Congress Center Building. When the Munks owned the house, another artist, James McGarrell, lived there when they were in Europe on sabbatical. Works by both Misch and McGarrell each hang in the house.

Charlotte was a major animal rights activist along with her cousin, Graziella Boucher, who did not live with the Mishes. Robert Mish, most likely Charlotte's father, was still listed as living in the house in 1934. By 1935, Charlotte had left the house and moved downtown for reasons unknown. Sometime between 1935-1941 Frank and Nelly Errington took possession of the home, giving the city of Portland an easement in 1941 for a sewer line. Frank Errington subsequently sold the property to Herbert and Laura Bebb in 1946. Herbert Bebb was an architect who made changes to the house, possibly updating the gables on the home, and built the garage that still stands next to the home. The Bebbs only occupied the home a little over a year as Herbert Bebb left for Chicago.

Frank Munk and his wife, Nadia, purchased the home from the Bebbs in 1947. It gave them the kind of stability that they had perhaps needed after deciding not to return to Czechoslovakia after it was liberated. This is the home where Michael and his sister, Susie, his junior by three years who raised a large family in Seattle, grew up. Frank taught at Reed College from 1939-1941 and for three years at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was a Lecturer in economics and after serving with UNRRA during WWII, again at Reed and PSU until he retired in 1995. His son-in-law describes him thus:

Frank was an intellectual—he studied everything from the weather to security markets to international politics. For more than 20 years he appeared weekly on Portland television where he conducted a one-person program devoted to international politics. He founded the World Affairs Council of Oregon in 1950. He was later named First Citizen of Portland and became a well-known public figure in the state...

Nadia's story is equally impressive. She helped resettle refugees of the Sudetenland, that part of northern Czechoslovakia that bordered Germany. Because Frank was born a Jew, their situation was dangerously complicated. In November 1938 Nadia wrote to her sister, Vera Scott, "Even though I am not Jewish and Frank hasn't practiced any religion for 20 years as our family has not [practiced Catholicism]...Suzanne and Michael will be condemned for life without a chance to be educated and lead normal lives..." Nadia acted as translator for Miss Wellington who was helping evacuate Czechs to England but had trouble with the Czech language. Years later, in Portland, Nadia taught at the Hillside school and was a founder of the nascent Friends of Marquam Nature Park.

Michael pauses to point out a dawn Chinese redwood (*Metasequoia*) in the back yard, a deciduous redwood planted from a seedling by his father many years ago. Like his father, Michael continued the family academic tradition, graduating from Reed College, attending the University of Oregon where he received a Master's in Political Science, then drafted in the army in 1959 and sent to South Korea. Upon his return he was a journalist for the leftist New York weekly *National Guardian*.

After receiving a PhD from New York University, he taught political science at Stony Brook University, Roosevelt University in Chicago, and Rutgers University in New Jersey for twenty-five years before retiring to Portland in the late 1990's. He owned a beach house in Gearhart, Oregon for years, as well as a house boat on the Willamette River while in college when he worked as a "white card" casual worker during the summers in ILWU Local 8. His championing the cause of Workers' Rights was a given.

Now for my second mistake.

Michael's is not a mind at rest. Since his return to Portland, he has researched and published articles and books on local radical history in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, *The Portland Alliance*, and *The Oregonian* that listed him among Portland's "local literary luminaries." He also authored *The Portland Red Guide*, now in its second edition from PSU's Ooligan Press. I suddenly connected the author with my favorite book about Portland history, embarrassed but ecstatic about my discovery. "You have the book?" Michael exclaimed! "Damn straight," I replied. "Workers of the World Unite!"



And the bike ride home was much easier. It was all downhill.