Job Market
A Memoir

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1970 was a poor time to be on the academic job market. The postwar expansion of higher education, that had created so many jobs for recipients of a doctorate, was ending. The country was not only in the midst of deep divisions over an unpopular war and protests over race, but the beginnings of a sharp contraction of the economy that would see an end to unprecedented prosperity that followed the world war. The children of the greatest generation's middle classes, like me, had grown up without ever being able to imagine the scarcity or insecurity that our parents remembered from their experience of the Great Depression and war. America became a consumer's paradise for its rapidly expanding middle class. Where this left a cohort of recent or about to be Doctors of Philosophy was up in the air. For me, the situation projected all the insecurities and confusions I possessed. The Age of Aquarius was no paradise, at least for me.

Not that I was conscious of much of this. I took the world as far as it concerned me pretty much for granted, or at least only dealt semi-consciously with my own confusion about my place in it. Mostly because, my parents' dysfunctional emotional lives aside, I had very little to feel knowingly apprehensive about. That dysfunction was all-encompassing, involving intersecting layers of infidelity, a near divorce, financial scandal, trusting the wrong people, and public embarrassment. But I lived with it, without much understanding of what its impact on me was. I might well have been entitled to be desperate, but instead I was clueless.

More than most adolescents I was laboring, awkward and confused, to create my own identity, a purpose, a trajectory, a path I could traverse mostly alone, because I didn't have much to guide me. I contracted a marriage to my high school girlfriend in the belief that I would be starting my own life anew at age twenty-three, and would be my own man at adult ground zero.

I had a lot of choices as I approached graduation from Northwestern in 1966, but they involved places, not pre-professional preparation. They came down to which law school or which graduate program in history. My father had wanted me to be a lawyer and go into practice with him. Should I have been attracted by the prospect of getting rich, being his partner putting together and taking apart insurance companies, and living in one of those instant affluent suburbs with a wife and the era's optimal three children? That didn't appeal to me. My father removed the burden of my telling him I wasn't interested by quitting the law and leaving town for an academic position in Arizona. Anyway, I did poorly on the LSAT. The questions made no sense to me, and I couldn't understand the logic that underlay the test. I tried to see what it had to do with law, and got distracted, kept looking at my watch, and in the middle of the test, decided to go to graduate school. What an irony was that? He wanted me to go into law, but became an academic around the same time that I embarked on that path. We both left the law around the same time.

Among the universities that invited me to join their program was Princeton, which gave me a guaranteed four-year fellowship. That appealed, to the extent I would not be dependent on my parents. The appeal wasn't

only the money. My idea was that I would contribute to rethinking American history in line with my not very thoughtful, but earnestly felt, New Left politics. There were three young professors there who were writing history to provide foundations for the contemporary Civil Rights Movement—not ideological hacks but creative minds working in the lonely heroic traditions of scholarship in the archives. We all believed in doing away with race as a way of defining people, and in integration, and hardly would have been able to grasp the problems those hopes faced, from every which direction.

This was hardly enough inspiration to sustain success in a program that wanted you to be an academic professional in pursuit of a career. That, I didn't understand at all, and probably didn't get the point until well into my own career. I thought of graduate school as the fifth year of the liberal arts curriculum. I would keep learning what happened in the past and maybe why it happened. Beyond that, I wanted to profess, maybe preach, more than to teach. I wanted to do research, time travel with my dead subjects and discover their moral lives and their purposes. I was looking for mentors among the dead, in proportion to the trouble I had connecting with authority around me. I always thought that writing history was about people, not about contributing to a literature, and this probably held me back. But it held me back from being something I didn't want to be: an academic statesman, the voice of the profession, and a cheerleader for the institution where I was employed. Groucho Marx has been looking over the shoulder, telling me not to join any club that would have me as a member.

I didn't fit in well in my first year at Princeton. I was lonely, and seemed to cultivate loneliness. That had been true at Northwestern as well. I didn't live in the Graduate College, the cloistered Gothic redoubt a mile or two from the campus, where the residents ate in a massive refectory (a word I had to look up), wearing academic robes. The evening meal began with grace said in Latin. I found a rooming house where I lived with a peculiar mix of people. There was one student who by coincidence was in the history department, and we became friends, but the other residents were an example of what to avoid in adult life. A World War II veteran who had taken a hatred of Asians out of the conflict, a Taiwanese ex-military officer and lower-level diplomat, an alcoholic who locked himself in his room and tried to drink himself to death, you name it. The Chinese diplomat and the American vet had a fist fight, and the alcoholic's brother had to come from Philadelphia to rescue him from his fetid, bottle-strewn room. I had never been far away from home before, and didn't make many friends. The friends I did make, including a former high school teacher from a small-town in Illinois whose complete lack of style and perpetual understatement concealed the wickedly anarchistic substructure of his personality, were as alienated from the prospect of being easily integrated into academic life as I was.

Antiwar activism helped to sustain me through that first year, as did my commitment to somehow getting on with a program, the nature of which continued to elude me, but even more sustaining was the thought that if I got married at the end of the year, I'd make a settled life for myself on the campus and not have to fit in.

What was this "fitting in" that I keep returning to? Being a Jew at Princeton was part of it, but I had also been a Jew at Northwestern, where the typical undergraduates in my classes seemed to be the daughters or the sons of the President of the First National Bank of Wapakoneta, Ohio. Everyone there was linked by some rules, about how to behave and what to value, that no one had ever bothered to explain to me. Now I was a stranger again, at Princeton, where I never attended an athletic event, ate at the venerable undergraduate eating clubs, or just hung around anywhere. There weren't a lot of my kind—urban Jews

among whom the Old World continued to lurk—but I wouldn't have sought them out anyway. I went to my classes on Yom Kippur and thought nothing of it.

Nor was it the impossibly distinguished provenance of the place, with its never-ending list of great men among the faculty, and it's undergraduate students recruited out of the nation's elite, relative to my humbler, near-immigrant origins. One grandfather had been a garment worker; the other walked through the slums of Chicago collecting a dollar there and there from poor people to pay for their life insurance. My family wasn't deeply educated, but my father had a law degree, earned during the depths of the Depression, and at some point, while I was at Princeton, he came to bear the title of "Professor." My Chicago cousins were all in college at the same time I was, and ultimately became professionals or married them. Anyway, the Princeton graduate students weren't children of privilege—all of us were on fellowships, and we were mostly not of the same social backgrounds as the undergraduates. Few Americans were. Many of the undergraduates there were of old, monied and prestigious families who were national players, not Midwestern regional ones, as at Northwestern, where I also felt out of it. Not fitting in was a characterological issue for me more than a social or cultural one. It was just me, as it remains.

I suppose I did well enough academically that first year: they didn't cancel my fellowship and kick me out of the program, to be seized by the Vietnam War draft when my student exemption was taken away. Maybe that was why they didn't do so. Everyone hated the war, faculty and students alike, but the former, especially among the World War II veterans, did not approve of the way the latter chose to oppose it. They might have been world-class intellectuals and scholars, and an outspoken Marxist aside, were probably mostly social democrats, with a few Rockefeller Republicans among them. But a submerged current of patriotism lurked among those who had fought in World War II, as did a conservative concern for the stability and integrity of the established institutions like Princeton that sustained civil society and in doing so sustained the American republic. A handful of us met with the dean of students, a distinguished academic in a beautifully tailored suit, and *demanded* that he not share student records with the Selective Service System. He actually agreed—without taking our names and threatening our fellowships. I lost track of the fate of that issue, and hence, whether he had agreed with us for the sake of clearing his office of riffraff, who were not to be taken seriously, but appeased in volatile times.

Through hard work and the stability that briefly came with marriage, I began to improve my performance in the second year of graduate school. I was taking courses in American history, and that made a great difference. I was working with younger faculty, who were much less intimidating, including those three eminent men I'd come to study with. A few of the other junior colleagues were as insecure as I was, and I must have sensed that. Those I liked the most never reached the stage of a permanent appointment, let alone a tenure vote. The faculty took on a few such recent Ph.Ds. at the time, ostensibly to test whether they had the right stuff. Few did, but they were told as they got their walking papers, that the recent past would look good on their CVs. I believe that, honorably, the Princeton department helped them find new positions. Two ended up at Rutgers, which some Princeton people look down on as the state university but which, within a few decades, came to have one of the finest history departments in the United States.

I passed my oral and written examinations, got praised for my performance, and went off to Columbus, Ohio, to spend a year doing research for a dissertation on what, at the time, was naively called "race relations," in a northern state between the Civil War and

World War I. My wife worked at the campus bookstore across High Street from the historical society, and we lived in a shabby student apartment in a neighborhood near Ohio State that was called "the capital of West Virginia." The convenience store across the street from our apartment seemed to get robbed every Friday afternoon about five o'clock, as one or another of our Mountain State neighbors gathered resources together for the weekend.

University of Michigan which I was completely unprepared for, and a better one some months later at Oberlin, as my marriage seemed to be disintegrating. Neither place wanted to hire me, and the market for me seemed to be vanishing. My talk with the chair of the Oberlin department wasn't about the job, but about marriages coming undone. He had some experience with that. He was very reassuring, but that conversation hardly made me an attractive prospect for his faculty.

He introduced me, and while I was considering the odd assembly around me and getting ready to perform, donning my imposter's intellectual costume, he requested that I refuse to be interviewed and then leave the campus.

We were back in Princeton in the fall of 1969, and I was writing my dissertation, while dealing with the persistent message from the faculty that I had best start looking for a job, because that year marked the end of their obligation to support me. By the time I started that search, the job market was constricting, spreading panic among the graduate students, though the whole idea of a career remained elusive for me. How do you make one? How do you impress people with your brilliance? What if you know you're not brilliant, but rather an imposter, making it up as you go along? I had a lot of insecurities as I embarked on a search that required me to impress people. At my very best, I was merely hardworking, and focused on completing tasks. It took me the entire day to write three pages of a draft of my dissertation, at least in the first year I worked on it. The damn thing turned out to be over 500 pages long and had to be bound in two volumes. The time away from my wife didn't do us any good. She had troubles I was barely aware of, and couldn't respond to, preoccupied as I was with trying to be an academic.

I had a disastrous job interview at the

But then in the spring of 1970, as hopelessness was spreading among the graduate students, and as campus after campus was dissolving in protests against the war, and on behalf of Black Power, I got a call to come for an interview at a well-reputed liberal arts college in the eastern Pennsylvania countryside. I had been recommended by the Director of Graduate Study in the Princeton department, Joseph Strayer, a most prestigious historian of the Middle Ages, and a tough, no-nonsense man whose face turned red like a warning beacon when he was agitated. He had a large unidentifiable bump on his forehead that was ominous. He had been the departmental chair for decades and should have had a pass when it came to doing more administrative work.

How they ever talked a man then in his mid-sixties with a brilliant career to take on the burden of helping people like me to find jobs and prevail in interviews, I can't know for certain. The way things worked then, and could rightly never work in the stricter meritocracy that now exists, was that the department seeking people to interview called

various history departments' directors of graduate study and asked whom they might have looking for a job who did, for example, the middle period of American History, with an emphasis on race and the struggles for Black equality. And who can you promise is just about done with the dissertation, so that we don't have to terminate them after only a few years as a non-performer? Strayer's extensive contacts in academia probably recommended him as a man who could use influence to place the department's doctoral students. He could have said, "No," but he didn't. A feeling of crisis was in the air about finding jobs for the graduate students, a matter of the credibility of the program and of the usual desire to cast off those they'd seen through their doctorates.

It was Strayer who identified me, a student he did not know and who had never worked with him for so much as a minute. Beyond finding out there was a position there, he knew nothing about the job, but he had determined that it seemed right for me. I did that field and was nearly done with my dissertation. The chairman at the Pennsylvania liberal arts college called me to invite me to the campus. There was urgency in his voice. Could I come at the end of that very week? They needed to fill the position immediately. What I failed to know was that they had no intention of filling it with me, no matter how much my brilliance was on display. Strayer called me into his office and prepared me. He called me "Mr. Gerba," and did not use my first name. (Another faculty member, equally very distinguished, called me "Mr. Jerbère," with a distinctly French lilt, for four years.) The stakes for me were great, he implied, and it would be a good place to start a career, even if you didn't necessarily want to stay there. The Princeton faculty said that about nearly every place where we interviewed, and assumed we all should aspire to move on up to the Ivy League. Jobs were at a premium, he said though he certainly didn't have to, and beggars can't be choosers, which he did not say, but was obvious at the time.

Early on a Friday morning Susan and I, now briefly reconciled, got in our tired, disreputable station wagon and drove to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, deep in the heart of Amish Country, which was becoming a bearded and bonneted theme park. I was relieved that the car made it the one hundred miles to Lancaster. My initial impression was that this was not a bad place to live, maybe stay married, raise kids, and be happy ever after. Then there was the campus, its stately nineteenth-century buildings proud and seemingly eternal, though more than a few were faux nineteenth century, and full of trees and plantings, green everywhere on that cool mid-spring morning.

I was determined to prevail. Here I'd make my stand as a much-needed addition to someone's faculty. A scholar who, you could bet, would be an exemplary instructor and well-published historian, with projects galore beyond my dissertation I could speak about to prove it, though they were nothing but notional at that point. I'd explain that I had exciting ideas about teaching "race relations" and that my dissertation was going to make a splendid, pathbreaking book, though only the latter half of that promise ultimately proved nearly true.

We parked near the history department, and I went to the chair's office, while a secretary promised to entertain Susan, who would meet us for lunch. The departmental chairman, greeted me, and took me into a nearby conference room, filled with faculty and many scruffy-looking students who effected that alternative look of liberal arts college students of the time that combined Che Guevara, Farmer Alfalfa, and the cast of *Hair*.

He introduced me, and while I was considering the odd assembly around me and getting ready to perform, donning my imposter's intellectual costume, he requested that I refuse to be interviewed and then leave the campus. I knew that I had not screwed up sufficiently yet to be excluded from consideration. I hadn't uttered a word. I was

dressed neatly, properly zipped up, combed, and wearing a tie. But it wasn't me who was the problem. Rather, it was the senior leadership of the college's faculty, which was engaged in a standoff with the History Department, its chair, most of the younger departmental colleagues, and an activist contingent of anti-war students. A young visiting professor, Henry Mayer, was a great favorite among the students, and had taken on a role as an inspiration for the anti-war movement on the campus, and for contemporary campus radicalism in general. Mayer had a one-year appointment, and that one year was coming to a close. Some faculty outside the department were outraged at his activism, that is to say, for encouraging behavior among the students that did not focus on taking final exams and quickly leaving for the summer. A campus without students, especially in those times, had a great deal to recommend to faculty who hated the disorder around them. I was interviewing to be his permanent replacement, though everyone in the room that morning hoped or, in the case of the students, demanded Mayer be interviewed for the permanent position. The interview would have been pro forma; everyone in the room wanted to hire him to join them permanently. If they brought in a reputable person who, weighing the situation politically and ethically, sided with the party of virtue and removed himself in protest, it was a sign that it would be an outrage to force Mayer to leave for his politics. It would also demonstrate that no one with any character would allow themselves to be interviewed under those circumstances. (As it turned out, Mayer left anyway, returning to California to live on a commune and become a part-time academic and fulltime opponent of the war.)

All this was explained to me succinctly and with just enough zeal that I knew they were serious and, in their way, principled. That is, principled except when it came to me, whom they had fashioned as a tool to prevail in an interfaculty conflict driven ultimately by insistent, radicalized students. Even I figured that out immediately, although I probably asked if the situation could be explained once more, not only to take in the details again but to gain some time to figure out what to do in the moment. I heard Strayer's voice in my head: the job market was poor; we had to take our opportunities where they presented themselves; prevail in this interview because you may not get another one. Three strikes and you're out, and I was facing my third strike.

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I responded that the situation was certainly unacceptable, that I was worse than inconvenienced, and that I would leave, as they requested. Though I didn't say it, I was mostly on their side in the politics of the situation. But more than that I felt a certain respect for Mayer being his own man and not, as I seemed to be, a prisoner of the job market. At that moment he seemed sort of inspirational and, not caring much about the impression he was making when his future was in the balance, brave in a foolhardy way.

Did the students in the room clap when I responded to the chairman? I don't recall, but a collective moment of smiles and thanks

happened. So, I said, let me collect Susan and we'll leave. But the chairman and the students wanted me to go beyond that moment's great refusal. The chair asked me to go through the scheduled second part of my interview: a meeting with the committee of senior faculty which had some administrative role, probably a veto, in appointments, and which was fundamentally opposed to Mayer's spending one more day than necessary on the campus. Then a student in the room asked me if I would address an antiwar rally scheduled for the campus that afternoon. Part of the agenda for that rally was to protest pushing Mayer out of consideration to be his own, permanent replacement. I said yes, to the former, because it seemed formally correct that I explain myself. But I said, certainly, no! to the latter—I knew that receiving a hero's welcome in a public ceremony, let alone giving the students a full-throated Venceremos, would be a disaster. Again I heard Strayer's voice in my head admonishing me, though I had no clear impression of what exactly he would want me to do. Clear out? Explain myself? Certainly not lead the campus antiwar movement—that I was sure of.

The chairman led me to the administration building, and into a cold, undecorated conference room with maybe twenty gentlemen, mostly middle-aged and older, all grim-looking, determined, and uncomfortable. While walking there I told him that I feared the consequences of staying and completing the interview, where everything I said would be on the record. But that now seemed decided. I feared leaving even more, which would have put me in a bad situation at Princeton. He said he'd take care to explain to Princeton what was happening on their campus and how I came to be involved in it, and that was, he added, a promise I could count on. But at this point, of course, I had no faith in him.

The chair of that faculty committee was an eminent professor of literature. Famous on their campus, he was blind, and he spoke in a most authoritative way. He questioned me as if it were a deposition and he was the aggressive defense attorney who was framing a strategy of logic rather than facts for defending someone he knew to be guilty. Few of his colleagues spoke; it was the two of us, and I was badgered here and there, and my statements parsed for what was revealed in his mind to be unprofessional or illogical. I seem to have held my own, maybe even got resistant, less because of principle than because I desperately wanted to be elsewhere and felt greatly inconvenienced. Finally, he tried a gambit that got me to say, in effect, "I'm out of here!" He cocked his head toward me and with that disconcertingly direct but opaque look of the very blind, said something like, "What if I told you some things about Mayer that reflect very poorly on him?" I replied that I didn't want to hear them, and thought they were none of my business, and that it was best at that point that I collect my wife and go back to Princeton. I got up, excused myself, and left.

On the way out, the chairman thanked me profusely and said he owed me lunch, which I refused. He explained that since it was Friday, the Amish outdoor market was active and that it was a great spectacle, fun, etc. Your wife will love it, all sorts of arts and crafts and baked goods. Here's how to get there.... I found Susan, who was immediately outraged on my behalf—on our behalf—when I explained the situation to her. We left the campus and went to the Amish market, where, reflecting our tight budget, we had Pepsi and popcorn for lunch, and then went home to New Jersey.

If I were to measure the passage of time that weekend by the workings of my anxiety, it probably felt like a decade. How was I going to explain the situation to Strayer, who did post-interview meetings with those of us on the job market? Would he sympathize, or tell me I was a damn fool, and the department was finished trying to assist me, if I couldn't assist myself? I had no one to talk to about what had happened or what I was to say to Strayer about

the way I had dealt with it. Why I didn't confide in a friend among the graduate students, I can't say. Maybe I was just embarrassed to have a problem. The same, I think, for the faculty I'd worked with, embarrassed but also apprehensive. The story was so complicated that I feared wasting their time. Sadly, it never occurred to me to call my father and ask him what to do. He was now an academic and had many years of legal and administrative experience. But I had just stopped counting on him. He had so many issues of his own. Now I think it would have touched him deeply if I had asked his advice. But now I'm a father of adult children, who rarely want my advice.

Monday morning loomed before me like the hour at which I would face a firing squad. I rehearsed the entire weekend various versions of what I would say to Joseph Strayer, how I might piece together my narrative to give the impression of being aggrieved but not seeming a hapless victim. I thought, tough old guy that he was, he'd respond to that. Whining never does anyone any good, anyway. He's more likely to understand me, if I am angry, yet in control of myself, smolder, the manly way by that era's standards. The way we were instructed to behave by John Wayne characters in World War II combat movies.

There I was on Monday at his office door at nine o'clock. I had to wait an agonizing few moments while he finished a phone call. I entered and he told me to sit down. "Well, Mr. Gerba, how did it go?" Deciding that this was not the time to let him know what my surname was, but still confused how he could read my student file and continue to get my name wrong, I began to explain Friday's developments. His face turned red and then got redder. I thought that mysterious bump on his forehead would explode. He seemed at a loss for words, which I found terrifying under the circumstances. He looked at me, and in the full force of what I took to be outrage said, "They can't do this to us! We're Princeton!"

And for that one moment, I was, too. ▲