

Lessons in Philanthropy: A Tribute to Vera List

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In the late fall of 1981, fresh from Poland, I was sitting in a little restaurant at 6th Ave. and 12th St. called The Gauloise, waiting to meet an important lady named Vera List. I knew she was a member of the New School Board of Trustees, though I wasn't really sure what that meant. But I did understand that it was she who had funded my Katarzyna Kalwinska Fellowship at the Graduate Faculty.

As my English was poor, my only American friend, Jeff Goldfarb (then a young assistant professor in sociology), was standing by. When a graying but vigorous-looking woman joined us dressed in a trench coat and sensible shoes, she seemed a far cry from what I had imagined a wealthy American lady would look like. Her earthy but spirited demeanor reminded me rather of the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, who had deeply touched me in my early youth.

It was during this encounter that I received my first lesson in American philanthropy - philanthropy having long since become obsolete where I came from. A few years earlier, Mrs. List had read in The New York Times about a Polish peasant woman named Katarzyna Kalwinska. For over two years during the Nazi occupation, this woman had risked the death penalty - for herself and her whole family - by hiding 20 Jews in a shelter under her pig-shed. Vera List decided to remember that heroic woman by establishing an annual fellowship in her name at the Graduate Faculty for a student from Poland. I had never imagined that philanthropy could be prompted by such personal impulses.

In a conversation that must have been animated (since I was using more gestures than words), I tried as best I could to tell Mrs. List about the political excitement in Poland, about this amazing movement Solidarity that I was a part of, about the cracks appearing in the system, about the flourishing unofficial art and literary scene... I finished by suggesting that perhaps she'd like to come there with me on my return in June, to see it with her own eyes.

Well, she never came to Poland, and I myself was unable to return home for another eight years. Three months after my arrival at the New School, martial law was imposed in Poland. Solidarity was crushed, many of my friends landed in prison, and I was not able to go back. It felt as though the earth had fallen out from under me. But in this most difficult moment of my life, the enduring ethos of the University in Exile made an extension of my fellowship seem natural. Vera List supported that ethos, and ultimately gave me a new life.

Then came my second lesson in philanthropy: namely, that a gift - like Vera's to the New School - can become much larger than the donor had expected. During subsequent get-togethers with Vera, I told her about the work we were doing with dissidents in Eastern Europe, and about the Kalwinska Fellows who had come after me. They had all become dedicated "citizens" of the New School, taking back with them the values that Vera List and this community stand for. Among them are a major public intellectual, a translator of and authority on Hannah Arendt, the director of Poland's first public opinion polling service, the political editor of a major Polish daily, and the vice president of a foundation for rural development. All of them follow Vera List's example of private agents working for the larger public good.

Wislawa Szymborska, now a Nobel laureate, once wrote that "a gift is not a gift, but a loan." Vera's gift is a loan which is being widely repaid, both in Poland and here at the New School. Her gift has served to develop a vibrant international community based not just on shared academic interests, but on trust, friendship, and civic engagement.

I would like to thank you again, Vera, for putting us on that track. I'm sure I'm not the only one here who believes we need to be on such a track - now more than ever. q

Vera List (1908-2002) was a long-time trustee of the New School and a New School adult student alumna.

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