

# THAT MAGDEBURG BOY

– a poem for John Rosenberg

1

2

We can follow his outer path:  
that Magdeburg boy  
rousted out of bed  
to watch the Torah burn  
on Kristallnacht 1938,  
the Civil Rights attorney  
sent to identify remains—  
Goodman, Schwerner, Chaney—  
in Mississippi in 1965.

We can lean over his shoulder  
as he helps draft the Voting Rights Act,  
can imagine his friendship with Jean,  
a co-worker in the Justice Department.  
We can picture him leaving a restaurant  
in Charlotte to call and ask, “Don’t you  
think we should get married?”

We can even envision them in 1970,  
done with D.C., pitching their tent  
near Auxier with baby Michael,  
when they came to consider  
a job in Prestonsburg.

We can trace his work:  
founding AppalReD in Kentucky,  
saving the town of David, helping  
rid the state of the scourge  
of the Broad Form Deed.  
We can study all he’s done  
to balance the scales of justice  
for people whose pockets are empty,  
whose lungs crackle with coal dust,  
who stand to lose their house,  
their health, who have come  
to the end of their hope.

But how do we find  
the inner way  
that seven-year-old took  
from the rant and blaze of Hitler’s hate  
to become this man whose work has been  
to give the voiceless a voice?

They say the Torah is written  
*in black fire upon white fire*  
but he saw the scroll itself burn.  
He saw his father arrested, taken away,  
then given back with thirty days  
to leave his poisoned country.  
So the family fled to Holland  
then to the U.S., to us,  
on one of the last boats out.  
This boy could have been bitter,  
clenched, like a fist.  
Could have become a man  
greedy to protect his own.

Instead, he opened up  
to the suffering around him,  
to American injustice  
which he saw for what it was:  
the Colored car on a southbound train  
another kind of ghetto,  
the bombing of a Birmingham church  
another Magdeburg synagogue  
dynamited from inside.

We can track the path of a life  
but not the growth of a soul.  
Its roots are in his family  
reborn in this country,  
its branches woven and strengthened  
by Jean, her love and work.  
But finally we come to its mystery  
and to our gratitude

to this man who made  
home out of exile  
healing out of hate  
who has brought justice through law  
and equal access to it.  
And who is still working!  
He could have gone anywhere  
but he pitched his tent here.  
Stand up. Speak out. Stay on:  
John Rosenberg.

– George Ella Lyon



**GEORGE ELLA LYON** is originally from Harlan County, where she grew up in a house full of stories and music. Lyon attended Centre, the University of Arkansas, and Indiana University, where she received a Ph.D. in English and studied with poet Ruth Stone. Lyon has published numerous books in many genres for readers of all ages. Married to musician/writer Steve Lyon, she lives in Lexington, where she makes a living as a freelance writer and teacher. Lyon acknowledged that it was privilege to work on this poem about John.

*Photo credit to Bobbie Combs.*