

**IN MEMORIUM TO MY COUSIN BOBBY LEES
BRUTALLY MURDERED ON JUNE 15, 2004**

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Last August, I visited my 91 year old screenwriter cousin, Bobby Lees, in Los Angeles. I had only met him once before, 14 years before, and it was on a whim I traveled to California to see him this second time, coinciding with a class he gave at UCLA on McCarthyism and cinema. He had worked in the 1930s and 1940s as a comic screenwriter for Universal Studios, and then had been blacklisted in 1951, for refusing to name names.

I remembered our first lunch, in 1990, and his funny quick eyes as he told stories of using so many pseudonyms at brainstorming sessions that people around the room would say, "hey I thought you were Selby!" Or "Ray". Or "John." At one time, Bobby Lees had six pseudonyms going on, not quite the successful career that he had had when writing Abbott and Costello movies. Following the blacklist, he moved his family to Arizona where a friend got him a job as a maitre de in a restaurant. A Democrat in the Badt family of self-made Jewish settlers in the West (Republicans), he became the black sheep.

At that first lunch, in 1990, over a big omelet and fries, I was surprised that my glamorous scandalous screenwriter second cousin (who remembered my father as the little redhead) spoke to me not about the thrill of writing, but about how proud he was that he would today walk out of any Hollywood party that had any guest who had

denounced names--including Ronald Reagan and Elia Kazan, whose lifetime achievement award he was to protest in 1989. After lunch, he escorted me around his one-story home on Courtney Avenue, with his chipper step and quips of jokes, to show me book after book on McCarthyism, stacked on low bookshelves along the wall, and papers of protest he had written, yellowed with the uneven characters of typewritten ink. He especially enjoyed showing me the dialogue he had "performed" spontaneously when he was sent before the HUAC in 1951.

Forced to cross the country in a bus, from California to DC, like all "summoned" writers, he had been put in front of the Committee to denounce Fred Rinaldo, his writing partner of 17 years. Instead, he circumvented the judge's attack, playing with the clause that he could not denounce someone, unless he himself introduced that name first. In "Who's on first" fashion, he responded to the question: "Do you know Rinaldo?" with "Who?" "Your partner." "I know my partner, yes." And his name is? "I believe that is public information, sir." "And his name?" "The one next to mine on the script."

The dialogue ended with him pleading the fifth.

When I met Bobby Lees for the second time, this past summer, he walked forward with the halting mini-steps of a man thinned and rigid by age, but forward nevertheless, smiling, and beckoning me along. After the UCLA class, which he co-taught with Ira Teller, producer at the Sundance Festival, he quipped that Ira had a BMW while

he, as screenwriter, had his house donated him by two old ladies who felt sorry for him being blacklisted for 10 years and gave him their inheritance. He had been blessed by fates, in some way, although, an atheist, he did not believe in fates. He made his way forward, that's all.

Deja vu : he took me to lunch: to the same diner that we had gone to 14 years before. He joked with the waiter, the maitre-d whose position he once had. We talked about the war in Iraq, and why he had a "Fight War" sticker on his delapidated car, where he had moved all his newspapers for me to sit down.

McCarthyism? "We're back there again," he said. "All the same signs. More coffee?"

He asked the waiter to wrap half his sandwich and give it to me to take for the road. It was too big for him, he said, smiling, always smiling. In the obituary, the son of his partner said that it was this positive smile that made him live to 91.

And perhaps longer, if not for a homeless man who surprised him in his house last week, who allegedly stabbed and beheaded him, and then carried his head across his backyard, to then stab and murder his neighbor, an elderly doctor. His 86 year old girlfriend ("I have a girlfriend!" he had quipped with me), returning the next morning, knew something was wrong when the morning newspaper was still on the porch. She found his headless body under a bloody blanket, with blood splattered on the

office wall. The same office which I had seen twice, in the sunlight, full of his papers. His head was found in the other home.

The man who brutally killed my cousin was one of those down-and-out that Bobby Lees cared about. He had listened to my own stories of struggles as a writer, and humanitarian projects abroad, and had leaned forward with twinkling eyes, under his hooked arched eyebrows, to say, "I am proud you are in the family." In his bedroom hung his childhood plaque: "The world is my home. All men are my brothers."

Before our last hug goodbye in the street, before he helped direct me back up to Sunset Boulevard, waving behind my car with a slow steady hand, I took one last tour with him of his house, and said, "Can I see something you wrote?" A man who spent fifty years in the business, who had returned after the Blacklist to write for "Lassie" and "Alfred Hitchcock Presents", should have been proud to show me some clips of his talented career. And as a film professor, I was interested.

"I have nothing," he said.

"Well can I see a movie you made? A video?"

"Oh I don't have any of that."

Instead, he eagerly, with his bright eyes and halting step---- perhaps the halting step of a man who has begun

his life in convictions and stayed to the same path--- perhaps the step of an old man whom history was passing by at the same time it was repeating itself----instead Bobby Lees found a yellowed original of his speech in front of the House of UnAmerican Activities.

"It's the best thing I ever wrote," he said, holding the paper in front of him, staring. His eyes for once were somber.

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**STATEMENT OF ROBERT LEES FILED WITH THE
CLERK FOR THE RECORD --- HOUSE
COMMITTEE OF UNAMERICAN ACTIVITES -
1951**

I believe no man who has made writing his profession can completely dissociate himself from people. He writes about them - he writes for them. They are both his inspiration and his audience. Their political freedom guarantees the necessary tools of his trade - freedom of thought and expression. I emphasize this relationship because it explains why I believe a writer must also function as a citizen.

In my career as a writer, I have worked in the motion picture industry for the past seventeen years, starting when I was old enough to vote. Before that I had attended grammar and highschool in San Francisco where I was born. My parents were also native San Franciscans. In the early

thirties, I moved with them to Los Angeles. The depression ended my college career at UCLA before I could complete my freshman year. After a short experience in films as an extra and bit player, I started as a screen writer at Metro-Goldwyn- Mayer. My name has been associated with over fifty short subjects for that company, mostly Robert Benchley and Pete Smith comedies. Two of these won Academy Awards.

Since then I have received writing credit on some fifteen feature films, starring such comedians as Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray, Olsen and Johnson, Abbott and Costello. I certainly don't think I have been summoned to Washington because of these comedies. I believe I am here because in those seventeen years that I have worked as a writer I have functioned as a citizen.

I firmly supported the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I joined with other writers and artists in actively campaigning for him. Being concerned with the rise of fascism in Italy, Spain and Germany, I and others in Hollywood protested these dictatorships. During the war I worked to better our relations with our Allies. For these same reasons, I did several scripts for War Bond Shorts. I went to Washington and helped prepare a technical film, "Substitution and Conversion," which was requested by General Sommervell. The film not only played in theatres, but in shops and warplants. For these pictures I was given a commendation by the War Department and the War Activities Committee.

Since that time, since the death of President Roosevelt, I have felt a growing concern, along with many others, that our subsequent foreign policy has not been successful in

achieving the peace the world fought so hard to obtain. I have been concerned with the Administration's "get tough" program on one hand and the fears of my two young children who tell me about the Atom-Bomb drills they have been practicing in school. I am concerned with the loyalty oaths, the thought control, and the endless investigations which have come about about because today we must believe that those who were our allies in the last war are now our enemies, and that those who were our enemies are now our friends.

Because of my concern, and because I am a writer who has functioned as a citizen, this Committee demands that I either conform to their dictates or be forced into silence.

It is my beliefs that cause me to be summoned here. It is because of the people I may know who have shared these beliefs, people whom the Committee wishes me to expose as subversive by the Committee's standards, that I have been summoned here. I am asked to purge my friends and my conscience under threat of having my seventeen years of work and devotion to my craft end in blacklist.

When I first decided to make writing my career, I did so because of what I felt about people. I have learned more about people and about writers and the tradition of writing since then. I know that I cannot write that war is preferable to peace, or that bigotry or conformity are virtues, or that one race or one chosen group are superior to any other and can dictate how others should live, or how others should think. I cannot, because no man of integrity can successfully write what he doesn't believe. And no writer, who is a true American, can ever force himself to betray his citizenship and his friends, or write the kind of material

that will be forced on the American people if this Committee has its way.