

Arnold Beichman, 1913-2010

BY [Christopher Caldwell](#)

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My friend Arnold Beichman, who died last week at the age of 96, was friendly with the British upper-crust novelist Anthony Powell and knew the New York organized-labor radical “Red Mike” Quill. He rode motorbikes, piloted planes, and could quote stanza after stanza of Heine and Musset in the original. At the left-wing newspaper *PM* in the 1940s, he mostly covered labor and race relations, but he also may have been Wendell Willkie’s closest confidant in the press. He met Babe Ruth. He traveled with the FLN in North Africa years before it took power and feasted with Iraqi Christians in the waning days of the Hashemite monarchy. William Howard Taft had just left the presidency when Arnold was born, and Barack Obama had just been elected when Arnold stopped writing his weekly column for the *Washington Times*.

What Arnold was proudest of was his dogged opposition to Communism every place that it raised its head. Arnold was a mainstay of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the early 1950s, a labor activist and an indefatigable writer and organizer. There is a funny paradox about anti-Communism. The misdeeds of Communism are today so obvious and well-documented that it requires a certain amount of patience and historical context to understand why, for instance, mobilizing international opinion against the show trials in Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s required any effort at all. So, although Arnold may have been the most fascinating storyteller I have met, he nonetheless gave the impression of being grateful to any listener willing to follow him through the historical twists and turns. His humility about what he had accomplished was the most shocking thing about him. You would find yourself wondering: What is this guy who is funny enough to be Kingsley Amis’s friend and smart enough to be Raymond Aron’s doing talking to me?

Arnold grew up in the overcrowded, polyglot, heavily Jewish Lower East Side of Manhattan. His family was from near Zhitomir in the Ukraine—something I recall only because of Arnold’s delight at accepting an invitation to Zhitomir to serve as an election observer after the collapse of the Soviet Union. If I remember right, Arnold’s parents wanted him to be a rabbi. He had certainly, by early adulthood, acquired a formidable education in Scripture. One day, after he had explained some religious doctrine or other, he asked me bluntly: “Do you believe in God?” I answered, a bit awkwardly, that I did.

“Why?” Arnold almost shouted. I mumbled something about how it seemed the most reasonable explanation of why there was something instead of nothing.

“Good!” he said, with what looked like surprise, having obviously gone over the question dozens of times with people a lot more learned than me. “That is one of the best reasons to believe. Still ...,” he said, nodding his head skeptically. “I dunno. I just can’t.”

That is what conversations with Arnold were like. In 1997 or so, he invited me to address a weekly lunch group he hosted at Stanford. A student asked me a question about political correctness, and I told him it wasn’t too much to worry about, at which point Arnold’s voice bellowed from across the room: “You’re wrong!”

Arnold’s bluntness was of the tough kind, not the rude kind. Maybe from reading Solzhenitsyn, I associate this kind of toughness with Eastern Europe. Arnold might possibly have survived as a *zek*. He never owned a winter coat. My wife and I remember walking for blocks along Pennsylvania Avenue on a February night, heading for a cassoulet restaurant in the 18-degree cold with Arnold and his elegant wife Carroll. We were all bundled up in scarves and hats. Arnold wore a blazer. He would have been about 87 at the time.

Why did those of us who knew Arnold love him so much? He mixed a lot of virtues that seldom go together in the same person: authority and curiosity, ambition and generosity, brilliance and humility. He was a battler who had the happiest of happy marriages, a drawer-of-lines-in-the-sand with a gift for friendship, a complex thinker who enjoyed the company of children. Last August, when my father-in-law died, Arnold sent a buoying note to my wife. I hadn’t heard from Arnold in months, and when you have a 96-year-old friend, a long silence can mean all sorts of things. So I wrote him back to ask how he and Carroll were doing in British Columbia—“Utopiaville,” as Arnold called it, where they lived surrounded by apple orchards.

“We are both well,” he wrote back, “I in particular, since I have staying with us in B.C. at el rancho grande my great-grandson,

his mother, and my daughter, the Japanologist professor, and her Japanese husband. As the Man sayeth, my cup runneth over." And that was the last I ever heard from him.

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