

Living History: Talking with Tito

John Gerassi interviewed by Tony Monchinski



John "Tito" Gerassi was born in France in July 1931. Fictionalized versions of his family appear in his "non-god father" Jean-Paul Sartre's Roads to Freedom trilogy. Tito has worn many hats: journalist, educator (among others at: San Francisco State; John Kennedy Freedom School in Berlin; and since 1978 the Graduate Center and Queens College of the City University of New York), author (of such works as The Great Fear in Latin America; The Premature Antifascists; the only authorized biography of Jean-Paul Sartre, Hated Conscience of His Century Volume I, which Sartre considered a continuation of his own autobiography), raconteur, activist and father.

If ever the personal were political and the political were personal, they are in this life. I interviewed Tito in his apartment in New York City where he is working on volume II of the Sartre biography, as well as a fictionalized account chronicling the Movement in the late 60s/early 70s.

Tony Monchinski: How does one go about becoming Jean-Paul Sartre's "non-god son"?

John Gerassi: My father, Fernando Gerassi, and my mother, Stepha Awdykowicz, had been involved in the Spanish Revolution. My father, a Sephardic Jew, was an artist who had lived in Spain at the time. He was working on the Revolution, a General in the Republican Army, when he decided he could not in good conscience bring a child into this world because he knew the Second World War was coming. This was in '31; his presence was amazing. He sent my mother to France for an abortion. She had had six previous abortions and wanted a child very badly; so badly in fact that she took the occasion to lie to him, to say that it was too late, that the doctor said it was too late.

By July [31 July 1931] they were all in France at a café, La Closerie des Lilas, across from the Clinique Tarnier -- today it's a VD clinic, but in those days it was a birth clinic. So my father, [Andre] Breton, [Marc] Chagall, and [Joan] Miro were all drinking there and every now and then my father would rush upstairs to find out if I was born, and each time would come back dejected -- "No, still not" -- so everyone would say, here, have another drink, and eventually he passed out. Just before he passed out though, Sartre, my father's best friend at the time who was teaching at *LeHavre*, arrived, and of course he was the only one in that whole group of artists and writers who hadn't been drinking, so he went up to see and when he came up I was born.

So my mother called me Jean-Paul in honor of Sartre, but my father said, "No, I don't like names with a draft in the middle." So Jean-Paul became John, Juan in Spanish, nicknamed Juanito, ergo Tito. Sartre was an atheist; hence my "non-god father."

T.M.: How did your father know Sartre?

J.G.: My mother was Ukranian born and she couldn't get along with her mother's new husband. She was put into a convent and she ran away, ended up a feminist writer at 17 in Vienna. Arrested there, spent a lot of time in jail. Eventually freed, sent to Germany; she was interested in music, met Alban Berg and they ended up living together in a house in Berlin that was only for musicians. Meanwhile my uncle, my father's brother, wanted to be a musician, and he lived in that same house. So when my father, who was studying philosophy at that time with Cassiers in Berlin and then Husserl in Freiburg, visited that house he noticed Stepha and eventually took her away from Alban Berg.

Simone deBeauvoir was in a class my mother was taking. They became very good friends because my mother went right up to Simone deBeauvoir in class and said, "Look, I notice you were trying to pick up that Hungarian guy there, you're not going to pick him up if you dress the way you dress or if you don't clean your nails, you gotta clean your nails." She taught Cantor [In French "*Beaver*;" deBeuvoir's nickname] how to pick up men.

My father had an affair with Cantor's sister, Pupette. This is all part of the historical record so I am not letting any cats out of any bags. After the Sartre biography came out, Pupette wrote me and said, "You know your book is very accurate and good except that you're also wrong about the way that your father deflowered me." That was her word, *deflowered*. I had written Sartre was mad at my father for taking Pupette's virginity in a closet. When I confronted him with that, my father said, "Oh, that's bullshit, there are no closets in France -- people buy these armoires -- it was on the floor." Pupette wrote me and said it wasn't on the floor; it was on the table.

Cantor introduced my father and mother to Sarte. The four of them just had an affinity and stayed friends. In 1945 Sartre came to America and immediately called up my father. When he came they embraced and at one point my father said something about "your philosophy explains why you were a collaborationist during the war" and Sartre was very insulted. My father wasn't putting him down for that. My father's best friend wound up fighting *for* Franco. My father was just stating a fact: he didn't mind you being an enemy as long as you had integrity in being an enemy. So their relationship was never established as profoundly as it was before the war; it was between Cantor and my mother, which continued until my mother's death (1989).

T.M.: In *Hated Conscience of His Century* you compare your father, Fernando, and Sartre. "Fernando was intolerant, loud and proud, sure of himself and of his judgments, very angry and very loyal, flamboyant and charismatic. Sartre (in 1929) was cool and collected, equally sure and proud, but careful and calculating" (1989: 15-16). Son of these two fathers, how did each man influence you and do you still feel that influence today?

J.G.: When I was young I admired Sartre because he was a writer and I wanted to be a writer. But I couldn't read his philosophy. As a young man, say 16, I was a little bit dogmatic, a Marxist, and I couldn't reconcile his notion of the Project with Marxism. In 1952, I went to France to ask Sartre if I could do a dissertation on him. We started talking and he said, "Well you sound like you are really very critical of my philosophy, why do you want to do it?" I said I didn't think that he could reconcile the Project with Marxism. He was then in the process of trying to link Existentialism with Marxism, so he said, "*That's exactly* my problem!" And it's as if I became like a revelation to him and since then we had a very close relationship.

My father's influence was much more as a man of action and as a moral man. The fact that my father would give up his life, his livelihood, the best part of his life when he was the most successful, because by 1936 he had really made it, he was exhibiting with Picasso, being quoted and reviewed everywhere, he was really hot, and painting like mad in 1936, when [Andre] Malraux came to the café to tell him that the Spanish Civil War had started. He was sitting at a table with Sartre and they were talking when he got up and went from the café directly to Spain and asked Sartre to take me home because he was babysitting me at the café (my mother was working).

That kind of thing about my father always made me want his approval, which he never gave me. That is to say, my father was incapable of giving a compliment. He would criticize, and you would learn after awhile that if he didn't criticize *that* was a compliment, but he couldn't say well done. He also never told me he loved me. On his deathbed one day, he called me in, 1974 in Philadelphia, the last operation at the University of Philadelphia for cancer; he called me in and asked my mother to leave, that he wanted to talk to me privately. And he said, "Listen, I want to apologize for my life." And I looked at him and said, "Jesus Christ, *what a life!*" He said, "Look, I'm very sorry I never said that I loved you; I never gave you the compliments. I realize now that that was terrible." I always wanted my father's approval; I always sought his approval.

T.M.: "Our friendship was never easy," Sarte wrote to Camus in 1952, "but I'm going to miss it." "What should I do?" mused Camus, "Go smash his face in? The guys too small." Sartre and Camus were both committed to the working class, in thought and deed. Simone deBeuvoir confides to you (1989: 181) that Sartre may have been a bit jealous of Camus. Yet Olga Kosakiewicz claims that Sarte broke with people like Camus because he "didn't like the way they lived or loved or whom they loved or simply the manner in which they talked" (1989: 181).

To what do you attribute the break between Sartre and Camus? How much of it was political and how much of it was personal?

J.G.: The first break or cooling off was like Olga said, Sartre would judge how people behaved, especially if they did so with people he respected. And Camus was a ladies' man. He would seduce women and then dump them. Sartre didn't judge that until it was done with someone he admired very greatly, an existentialist singer. Camus seduced her in such a way that this woman thought that this was going to be the love of her life. Then he dumped her. That was the first real break. Sartre was a moralist, despite the fact that he hated moralists and condemned moralists. You know, he really thought it was terrible for my father to have "deflowered" Pupette in a closet; he'd make those kind of judgments.

Afterwards Camus came to be seen as a defender of imperialism, even if indirectly. He was a *pied noir*, came from Algeria and could not make a statement in favor of Algerian Independence. Sartre was very active in helping the Algerian independence.

The big feud came out in the open with the publication of *The Rebel*. Sartre read *The Rebel* and said it was terrible, politically, but he was a friend of Camus so he couldn't do the review for *Les Temps Modernes*. Sartre asked [Francis] Jeanson to review it. Jeanson read it and was very, very upset because he said it was a terrible book politically. He said to Sartre, "Look, I cannot praise this book." Sartre said "Hey, I gave it to you, you do the review the way you feel, don't worry about anything else." So Jeanson attacked *The Rebel*. Camus responded by writing to Sartre instead of writing to Jeanson and instead of calling him *Monsieur Sartre* he wrote "To the editor." Then Sartre answered: a devastating attack, in which the main point is, before you can criticize the working class or the communist party, you have to know what it is to be poor and struggling all the time for just a decent living, especially in a country where there is so much divergence between the rich and the poor.

T.M.: The US Government, although it tried, failed to devastate the Gerassi family. Attorney General Bobby Kennedy sent your family a letter apologizing "in the name of America" after it was brought to his attention that the CIA, masquerading as Immigration officials, had been harassing your family for 20 years. What were they trying to accomplish?

J.G.: We came to the United States under fake passports, diplomatic passports that my father had gotten from Porfirio Rubirosa, who was the son-in-law of [Rafael] Trujillo, but who was a near-do-well and bum. My father had met him playing poker. My family was leaving Paris because the Germans were coming. Rubirosa gave Fernando the position of ambassador from the Dominican Republic, gave him the official stamp. Fernando, in turn, gave 8,000 passports to Spanish Republicans, Jews, whoever he could help, before the Germans caught up.

My parents came to America as Dominican diplomats. When the US joined World War II they asked my father to join the OSS. He served with the OSS in Latin America and then they sent him via submarine to Spain to set up an underground. General Bull Donovan already knew we were going to attack Germans in Algeria first and there was a possibility that Franco would allow the Germans to cross Spain to attack Gibraltar. So, my father's mission was to set up an underground in Spain and prepare to blow up all the bridges and roads. At end of war he gets this

commendation from Donovan for having made the African landing possible and a medal. But he still couldn't work because he was still not legal in the United States.

My mom and dad were limited by the immigration to a 25-mile radius around their neighborhood and the local postmaster was deputized by immigration. To travel they needed permission. Periodically two immigration officials would come and talk to him, "Did you know this, did you know that?" My father would never talk to them. He kept trying to schedule an immigration trial. The trials would get scheduled and then cancelled at the last minute in the name of national defense/security. Finally Abe Fortas went to immigration. Immigration told him they did not have our family file, that the CIA had it! So that's how Fortas and then my family found out that the PostMaster and all those people were CIA agents, not immigration, and they were trying to get my father to answer some question so they could then say, "Hey, you already answered questions for the CIA. How would you like all your friends to know you were answering questions for the CIA?" Fortas carried the whole file to Bobby Kennedy [Attorney General under President Johnson] and Kennedy made my parents by decree citizens and apologized in the name of America.

T.M.: Your history in journalism includes being an editor of *Newsweek*, correspondent for *Time* and the *New York Times*. When you were an editor at *Time* magazine, its owner, Henry Luce, told you "*We here at Time believe that objectivity is neither feasible nor desirable. Any questions?*" How do you feel about journalism today as America enters a new millennium with increasing corporate hegemony of the media?

J.G.: It was almost as bad then as it is now except that people didn't realize it as much. At *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*, every single story that we writers would write was first decided at a policy session where the angle (politically) to be taken was decided. At the *NYT* it was even worse, because they would either edit your story to say the exact opposite of what you were saying or they would kill your story.

In 1961 at the Punta del Este Conference in Uruguay [from which emerged the Alliance for Progress] Cuba sent as its delegate Che Guevara. *NYT* told me to cover Che. So a bunch of us reporters met Che at the airport and he announced he was going to go to the university first to make a speech. We went to the university. I was the only American correspondent there, all the others having gone on to Punta del Este. When we come out of the university there was a demonstration of anti-Castro Cubans who were trying to get close to Che. This policeman takes his gun and shoots in the air. The bullet ricochets off an overhang and hits one of the guys coming forward, a Cuban working for USIS. I sent home the dispatch to the *NYT*, explaining exactly what had happened and saying FYI: main witness is me, I was there. But the article that ran was the official article USIS put out, that in a confrontation between pro-Castro and anti-Castro forces there was a fight and an employee of the US embassy was killed by a pro-Castro guy. *NYT* wouldn't even acknowledge that there might be two stories.

I went to *Newsweek* and Mayer [Phil Graham] was trying to make it into a more liberal magazine, hiring all sorts of people that were on the left. For a while we had great freedom and

wrote tremendous things. After Graham's suicide *Newsweek* became like everyone else. I was writing a favorable piece on Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at any Speed*. Kermit Lansner, then managing editor, said, "Nah-nah-nah, we can't do that. He [Nader] attacks General Motors by name; we can't have a favorable review of a book that attacks a company that gives us millions of dollars a year in advertisement."

So, I learned, on the job, that there is no such thing as integrity in mainstream American journalism. Where there is integrity you can't make a living. You can't make a living being a full time journalist for *The Nation* or *Z magazine*.

T.M.: The CIA once poisoned you while you were dining with Fidel Castro. What were the circumstances behind that?

J.G.: It came out during the Church committee hearings that the CIA hired the Mafia to try and kill Castro. The mob was doing all sorts of crazy things, like giving Castro a book with very thin pages that were coated in arsenic so that he would have to lick his fingers. But of course they chose the *Little Red Book of Mao Tse Tung* which Castro would never read anyway!

They learned that 7 members of the Latin American press were going to have lunch with Fidel. I was working for *Newsweek* (1964). I'm having this lunch with them and as the first course they serve shrimp salad, and as Fidel is scooping this shrimp up with his fork he is talking and talking and talking and the shrimp would keep falling back on his plate and he would talk and talk and scoop it up and suddenly the waiter showed up and saw we had all eaten and took the plates out, including Fidel's (which he had not touched since he was talking).

On the ride back to where I was staying I realized I was very sick and my driver took me to a hospital. I passed out, came to a few hours later. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life was standing above me: my nurse, dressed in white with a .45 above the white, and saying, "You are alive thanks to Russian medicine." I said, "Ohhh, thank you!" In the anteroom all the 6 other guys were there, ill, but none of us got killed.

In the Church committee hearings it turned out that poisoning was another gimmick of Rosselli to try and kill Castro. What it did to me though is it made me allergic to shellfish from then on since my body used all its anti-bodies to fight the poison. A movement lawyer tried to sue the CIA but what the judge at the time said is we cannot sue the CIA since it wasn't an official CIA policy, but we could sue the CIA officer who gave that order and of course we didn't know who that was. When we finally found out who it was and that attempts like it were indeed CIA policy the statute of limitations had passed.

T.M.: Of your father, your mother remarked to Sarte: "The whole war is an empty gesture since it is lost. So what? Fernando is not fighting because he thinks we're going to win. He's fighting because he's antifascist and antifascism means fighting fascism" (1989: 132).

Camus wrote that he imagined Sisyphus happy, even if he was never to succeed in his task, for "the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."

Sartre wrote: "Will socialism, as such, ever come about? I know nothing about it. All I know is that I'm going to do everything in my power to bring it about. Beyond that, I can't count on anything" (1989: 31).

When you look at the left today, after all its been through -- the hope-filled 60s, the greed dominated 80s, the apathetic 90s -- do you find it easy to be pessimistic or does optimism still fuel you? Are we all engaged in "empty gestures" and should we be satiated with "the struggle itself towards the heights"?

J.G.: The gestures are not empty for individuals. Certainly in my life the happiest moments were in the movement, even though I got arrested and bopped on the head and exiled because I couldn't work. I was literally on a black list from 67 until I won it in court in 76.

Nevertheless, that period, when you felt you were meaningful in some way to the cause, was very fulfilling. It seems very hard to me today to have that attitude. Today many of us from the movement and the young as well -- though *not* the ones in Seattle or Washington -- seem to feel we have lost. Certainly many of the older ones, the 60s generation, seem to think that nothing is going to change in our lifetime; whereas in the 60s, although it wasn't really true that all of us expected the revolution to come tomorrow, nevertheless we saw positive changes.

Abbie [Hoffman] and I had these discussions and he would always say, "You have to stop thinking about reaching the goal out there somewhere but concentrate on the goal of struggling with your brothers and sisters to achieve benefits here and now on the path" to the goal. The struggle is a journey, not a destination.

People have always been struck by how nice conservatives can be and how rude some leftists can be. My response to that is that people who are on the left live in a constant state of perpetual defeat and frustration. It's very hard to be nice. For conservatives it's easy to be conservative because they win. I think it's much more difficult to be a leftist today, especially in a situation where you can be bought off so easily because chances are if you are educated and have a skill of some kind, which most activists do have, you can end up selling out for Silicon Valley or god knows where. It was very easy to be at *Time* and *Newsweek*. It was very hard for me to quit at the time. The status quo has its benefits.

T.M.: Nearly forty years after publication of *The Great Fear*, what hope do you see for oppressed people in Latin America and worldwide?

J.G.: Little by little, the rest of the world will realize that globalization means Americanization, that globalization is imperialism. Europe is reacting to that. Eventually Europe, -- after getting rid of England which is a pawn of the US -- will become strong enough. Japan (providing the technology) and China (the disciplined work force) and India (the raw materials) have to form an

economic unit which the tigers will join. The resulting competition might make the US economy collapse.

At that point, what *may* finally happen, is that US workers will come to the consciousness that they are not poor because they are schmucks as the propaganda has had them believe for so long and a new movement will start to come forth, an alliance like you saw in Seattle and Washington of the old and young, various groups putting aside differences to confront the beast head on.

T.M.: You once described yourself as theoretically an anarcho-communist. Why not a Marxist-Leninist?

J.G.: I have always opposed the claim of centralization that many Marxist-Leninists have advocated. I believe it is the task of whoever the leaders are to convince *the people* to *take part* in the process, to realize that *they are* the process, to help instill consciousness. This will entail a certain amount of decentralization. Before we get to "*to each according to his need*" we need to get to "*to each the same amount.*" It's outrageous that today in America kids in Mississippi are allocated \$60 a year for their education and kids in Westchester \$19,740. There is no free education in this country, it's a free enterprise education, the rich get well-educated and go on to control.

One of my judgments of democracy, all economic considerations aside, is whether the best schools are available free to all. Therefore, to me there is no democracy in America. Health and education need to be centralized, the rest doesn't. Somehow or other the arrangement in the community has to be restricted to the community to the point that people feel they have an influence over the decisions that effect their lives.

Most of these things are not part of the Marxist-Leninist way of running a country; the Central Committee decides. I want to see people really believe that they have a voice and that that voice matters. Put that together with decentralization and you end up being anarcho-communist.

The conundrum is due to apathy and because of a lack of consciousness mass uprisings are rare. It would *seem* like you need a vanguard to at least get things going. Yet every time you have had a vanguard you have had corruption. Rosa Luxemburg was in favor of the mass strike. When it happened in Germany, it was easily destroyed because of the lack of leadership. There you needed a vanguard. Yet in Russia, Lenin and Trotsky nailed the lid on the coffin of the people's Revolution by crushing the Kronstadt sailors.

Che Guevara dealt with it. He said if you can't build a socialist human being, a socialist state is not worth it. I buy that to a great extent. On the other hand, there are very few examples the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain came very close. I am just as baffled as everyone else as to how we bring about a consciousness that will allow for societal changes through a mass movement. In the meantime we must struggle at the grassroots level together to awake consciousness and force change where we can.

I guess the question for present and future revolutionaries is: How do you democratize a movement that is involved in the seizure of power where, by definition, power corrupts?

T.M.: How has fatherhood changed you?

J.G.: For me, nowhere else has the personal being political and the political personal been more palpable than through being a father. The first time I was a dad it was a disaster. I was working long hours and I was not a good father. Unfortunately that is what can happen when you marry young, are career-oriented and you want to "make it" in this system. You justify it as being the best for your family.

The second time around I did a much better job. I raised my daughter ,Lara, because my wife at the time was going through graduate school. My relationship with Lara and raising her (here in the Village) *also* had a political connotation. The pusher's used to come over and say, "Hello Cutsey," in fact she still has the nickname *Cutsey*, my wife and I call her, from those days.

It left a mark on Lara because the people who played with her in the park were all black. Even with the cops she developed a relationship and she got to see the relationship between the cops and the pushers. Usually the police didn't bother the nickel and dime bag pushers too much unless there was an order from city hall. Even when there was that order from city hall, friendships/rapports had been formed, so we could watch the cops warn their (pusher) friends, "Hey, we're going to have a round up tomorrow at 6PM so why don't you take tomorrow afternoon off?"

How could this occur? Because the police had a relationship with these guys and they couldn't just arrest them and bop them on the head. Which makes me think of when Huey Newton launched a movement in the early 70s in which he wanted the police to live in the communities. The white upper middle class movement people living there who were backing the panthers were like, what, we have to deal with the police, we don't want police living here. Huey and Bobby would answer, look, if you're constantly dealing with the police day in and day out, not just as police but as neighbors, as friends, you're both changing, you're both interacting with one another. And you get to the point where the policeman isn't going to be able to just shoot you, and you won't be able to say he's a pig. Sure, you might call the guy who is a pig a pig, but not all policemen. And that was inbred into my daughter.

I'm very good friends with some police officers. By and large the reason to become a policeman or woman these days is one of two: either because you're sadist and you like the power or you can't get any other job. It's true, it's a job where we can get benefits and decent pay. It's a way for members of the working class to make it. The fascism comes in at the corporate level where there is no equality of opportunity. We have the lowest levels here in the States of any developed country. There is no choice when it comes to education -- the best schools are free in Europe -- and there is no national health system that everyone can benefit from. We basically have a system of corporate fascism where each corporate identity has responsibility to itself and none to the people of the country in which it profits from.

I love being a father, but I never stop being a political animal. The fact that I could take care of Lara, raise her, walk her, made that possible, that I never separated the personal from the political.