

Bob Basker (1918-2001): Selling the Movement

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Courtesy of Jim Sears

Bob Basker, a native New Yorker, was a traveling salesman for the movement during the 1960s and 1970s, assuming activist roles in Chicago, Cuba, New York City, and South Florida before settling in San Francisco. He seemed for a time to go everywhere and meet everyone in the movement.

Basker's parents were from a *Fiddler on the Roof*-type community in pre-Revolutionary Poland. Immigrating to America, they operated a grocery store in East Harlem, where Bob, then named Solomon, the youngest of five boys, was born in 1918. After losing the store because of hard times, his family was dispossessed of its home on 109th Street. Forced to sell news-

papers, there were times when they could not afford even tenement rent and were put "out on the street."

Basker, who would be lauded by *The Advocate* as "Dade County's chief salesman for gay rights" forty years later, first demonstrated his activist bent at the age of fourteen. In 1932, he defended his mother in a New York City court for selling newspapers without a license. While awaiting the hearing, Solomon read Paul de Kruif's recently published *Microbe Hunters: Fighting Foes Too Small to See*. He also thought about how the owner of the speakeasy, across from the subway at 193rd Street and Bennett Avenue, had set up his "cook" with a newspaper stand three weeks after the Baskers had begun selling papers. Soon the number of papers they sold dwindled, while the competition, now with a license in hand, informed the police of the illegal operation of Solomon's mother.

After being informed that his mother was in violation of the law, Solomon asked the judge: "What would you rather we should do? Break a little

one-sided ordinance and sell papers so we can eat or observe this law and go away, not to make any money, to starve, and then, out of desperation, to steal?"

The judge dismissed the case and offered to write a letter to the licensing commissioner asking that Basker's mother be given some help in this matter. The magistrate then looked down on the young lad and asked: "What do you expect to be when you grow up?"

"I would like to be a doctor, your Honor," Solomon replied.

"No," said the judge. "You should be a lawyer."

Growing up within a staunchly religious family (he had been a cantor at the Uptown Talmud Torah), Basker remembered the German-American bund leaders in the mid-1930s making speeches against Jews, "looking forward to Jewish blood flowing into the streets." As a sixth grader, he recalled being beaten by Italian students, who rationalized, "Jews killed Christ; we're going to kill you!" Basker's political views were also shaped by Abraham Lincoln Brigades of youth fighting fascism in the Spanish Civil War and populist culture, from union songs such as "Solidarity Forever" to novels such as Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. As a budding activist at Morris High School, located in the Bronx, Basker was suspended for "arrogance, insolence, and insubordination" for organizing the American Students' Union, a coalition of student peace groups united against "the forces of reaction." Later, as a City College of New York night student, he led student peace strikes and distributed pamphlets published by the Workers Library, again facing the opprobrium of school authorities. While studying accounting, Basker also served as president of the Marxist Study Club and joined the George Washington Carver Negro Cultural Society, becoming a delegate to the National Negro Congress. Before his death, he lived in San Francisco and remained active in progressive causes. Basker sang me one of the songs of that day when I spoke with him:

City made a Marxist out of me who me
 I came up a petty bourgeoisie
 I came up to study some courses
 Now, I'm shouting down with the bosses
 City made a Marxist out of me

As a teenager during the mid-1930s, while selling newspapers on the trains, Basker discovered various men's rooms on the Lexington Avenue and Broadway subway stations where he would go to "be serviced or service." He also encountered "bushwhackers" (masturbating men in Central Park bushes) near 59th Street and Fifth Avenue when he attended the city's

brass band concerts. At the time, "I didn't think about being gay or straight," but a few years later he would go "camping" with gay kids at the park and enter the sexual underground: gay or mixed bars on 52nd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenue; the Cerutti's Waldorf Astoria on Lexington Avenue where Billie Holiday performed, and Bar 13 on Third Avenue where he found "great social relationships and after-hours private parties." There was also cruising outside of clubs such as Sardi's on Theater Row or going to the 181 Club that featured drag. Some of the men he met schooled him in the opera, ballet, literature, and classical music. Although Basker had heard of raids on the gay bars, the only incident he witnessed was one early evening when a policeman slammed "this sissy-boy into the back of his car" and slapped him around. "He was just beating the hell out of this kid. It was at that point that I became very antagonistic to the police because of this injustice." There was little, however, that homosexuals could do at the time. Efforts to organize the country's first homosexual group had failed a decade earlier in Illinois, and the Nazis had crushed the homosexual emancipation movement in Germany, destroying Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science.

Basker was also brought "in the life" of Harlem's homosexual community where he frequented the Paradise Club on 135th Street and Seventh Avenue—a straight nightclub downstairs and an upstairs bar for men—and he visited the Mount Morris baths. He became the only white member of the clandestine JUGGs ("Just Us Guys and Gals"). This group of fairly well-to-do black lesbians and gay men included professionals such as a Methodist homosexual minister and his lesbian wife who, after a late night of partying, would meet their congregation for all-day Sunday services. With them, Basker—dressed like the other tuxedoed men—frequented black drag shows and Saturday night house parties as well as straight supper clubs with a lesbian "date."

Similar to his Harlem friends, Basker faced discrimination. He experienced difficulties finding a job because of his first name, Solomon. When he enlisted in 1941, he informed the sergeant that his name was Robert: "I figured I might as well use a name that is more accommodating to getting by." Nevertheless, when Robert was recommended for officer candidate school by his commanding officer, Colonel Richardson Bronson, he was turned down by a panel of officers. "Colonel Whittington told my commander, Colonel Bronson, that he didn't like the shape of my nose or the way I parted my hair. In other words, he was not going to allow a Jew to go to Officer Candidate School."

Following the war (Bob saw service in England, France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany) and a brief stint in the import-export business, Basker became a salesman for *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He moved from New York

City to Chicago on a management promotion in 1952, after breaking up with Francis Galkin, a dress designer from Staten Island:

I was undergoing psychotherapy in New York for the purpose of trying to get to the point that I might be able to find successfully the right woman and raise a family. In New York it was impossible because I was so integrated into the gay life and my phone was constantly ringing.

After only being in the Windy City for a week, however, Bob spotted a young man on the street who was in the company of several other gay men. Basker followed them into an art gallery and "little by little nursed my way into their group," becoming lovers with the young man, Bobby McDowell. Nevertheless, he continued his psychotherapy as he sought to qualify as "a good husband and father." In 1953, he and his psychiatrist agreed that Basker was ready. Bob proposed to a woman named Hedda, whose family had come from Germany following the war. "I realized I was still gay, but I also wanted to have a family. My fiancée knew I was gay and about my friends, but we had a heterosexual relationship."

By the 1950s, Bob was living the quintessential lifestyle in a Chicago suburb with his wife and three children. However, he had not abandoned his socialist convictions nor his homosexual inclinations. During this Cold War era of loyalty oaths, the House Un-American Activities Committee, atomic bomb spy trials, and blacklists, Basker was active in many subversive and not-so-subversive groups, including the Chicago Council for American Soviet Friendship, American Veterans for Peace, the Civil Rights Congress, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Among his fellow activists was the blacklisted actor and singer Paul Robeson and "fellow travelers" Scott Neering, a long-time Chicago activist and writer, and Henry Noyes, then regarded as a spokesperson for Red China. Bob and Hedda supported Chicago families who were Smith Act victims, hosted Russian dancers during their Chicago tour, held fundraisers for Helen Sobell. Helen's husband, Morton, had been convicted in 1951 and sentenced to thirty years for conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviet Union. Bob and Hedda also wrote letters to local newspapers in support of racial integration.

Such activities did not escape the attention of Hoover's men. The FBI visited the Baskers' Skokie home, where Bob recalled that an agent stroked his four-year-old son's head. He remembered Hedda, who had been in a concentration camp, observed contemptuously: "The way you're doing that reminds me of the Gestapo doing that to me when they visited my mother in

Germany." The agent responded: "Oh! Then you're a communist." The FBI also visited Basker's workplace at *Encyclopedia Britannica* headquarters and he soon found himself out of work.

During the first spring of the so-called Camelot administration of John F. Kennedy, when freedom riders challenged the South's Jim Crow laws, Bob agreed to help bring about the racial integration of his Skokie neighborhood. Through the assistance of the American Friends Service Committee and the Catholic Interracial Council early in 1961, he and Hedda bought and immediately resold a newly constructed split-level home to a Hyde Park black professional couple. Basker's suburban home was firebombed. There was an unending stream of obscene phone calls. Menacing protesters marched and leaflets were distributed, asking: "Is communism infiltrating our community through the guise of integration?" Bob suffered a heart attack. Within a year, his wife—unwilling to live with a sick and sexually troubled husband—filed for divorce.

During the divorce proceedings, Basker was represented by civil liberties attorney, Pearl Hart. Hart was a founding member of the National Lawyers Guild and had collaborated with Jane Addams, the founder of Chicago's legendary Hull House. Similar to Addams, Hart was a closet lesbian and a lifelong activist in feminist and leftist causes. After the divorce, Basker's wife quickly remarried and moved to Cuba with their children. At the end of his seven and a half years of marriage and no longer with a family to worry about, Basker had little to hold him back. In 1961, he became involved in the fledgling homophile movement.

Now working for a travel company, Basker took advantage of the job to visit "different gay communities around the country getting a sense of how groups were organized." He spent time with Mattachine leaders such as Frank Kameny in Washington, Dick Leitsch in New York, and Hal Call in San Francisco. He also spent considerable time in Los Angeles at the ONE Institute overseen by Dorr Legg. He subscribed to the *Mattachine Review* and *ONE Magazine* and attended national homophile conferences. Locally, he tried to organize in Chicago's gay bars, which were subject to erratic raids—including one that resulted in mass arrests, names published in the newspaper, and several suicides. "I'd ask the bartender if I could talk to different people around the bar. It was very difficult to get the customers to understand the usefulness of the movement. On the contrary, the reaction I got was: 'You're creating waves and just going to get us into trouble.'"

Meeting little success in bar recruitment, Basker found his first breakthrough through his contact with Hart, who had defended homosexual men arrested through police entrapment and who gave Basker occasional client names as potential members. He also got names of Chicago residents from national groups such as Mattachine and ONE. Through these efforts, Basker,

under the alias Robert Sloane, eventually revived the "moribund" Chicago Mattachine Group founded in 1954 into a new Mattachine Midwest, a name suggested by Craig Rodwell, the founder of the nation's first gay bookstore. In that summer of 1965, Basker, as founding president, was helped by Ira Jones, prominent in the Episcopal church, Chuck Renslow, a gay bar and bathhouse owner (who would later begin the Mr. International Leather Contest), and the minister of a Park Ridge church that hosted the regular Mattachine meetings and helped produce a monthly local homophile newsletter—a rarity in the pre-Stonewall era. Basker also faced down Chicago red-baiting gay members who argued for "loyalty oaths" as a condition of membership. "I told them: 'If we do that I'll have to resign. These oaths are designed to break groups up, not keep them together.'" After his "consciousness-raising lecture" the issue was dead.

Within a year, the group had a functioning organization that included a telephone referral service (attorneys, clergy, bail bondsmen, psychologists) and regular guest speakers including visiting homophile activists such as Dorr Legg. The group also successfully challenged arrests in court. In 1966,

Detective Benjamin, who had quite a record of arresting gays in T-rooms, organized the random arrest of some fifteen young men crossing the street in the area of Clark and Diversey. One or two weren't even gay. Mattachine Midwest got them out on bond and had legal representation for them the next morning in court, together with a legal stenotypist. Our attorney was Rolla Klepack [a closet lesbian]. Benjamin didn't show up. The judge had him tracked down, and when he was asked why he hadn't shown, he replied: "I didn't think it was necessary. They usually plead guilty, anyway." Our defendants made a nice appearance, all freshly shaved, and in coats and ties. Charges were dismissed; Officer Benjamin reprimanded. We nicknamed the incident "the harvest of fruits." (letter to John D'Emilio, February 8, 1979, Basker papers)

The successful court case, as it had earlier done in Los Angeles, raised the homophile banner and attracted new members.

Shortly after this success, Bob Basker moved to Miami, hoping to visit his family regularly in Cuba. This gregarious salesman who was working again for *Encyclopedia Britannica* stood in sharp contrast to Richard Inman, who, as the founder of the South's first state-chartered gay organization, the Atheneum Society, preferred the solitaire of political intrigue. The two had corresponded when Bob was organizing Mattachine Midwest, but Inman, a wiry cab driver with ties to the intelligence community, was troubled by Basker's leftist background. A staunch anticommunist, Inman had

supported the failed Bay of Pigs and labeled Bob a “pinko of the worst kind” (letter to Warren Adkins, September 28, 1965, in Inman papers).

Within a few months, Bob was on his way to Cuba to be reunited with his children. Teaching English and serving on the board of the *Norteamericano Amigos de Cuba*, Basker promised to make “as much of a contribution to the Revolution as I can” (letter to Campanero Hugo Garcia, March 25, 1967, Basker papers). However, he soon proved less helpful to the Cuban government when he organized support for two Cuban teachers who were accused of being lesbians and fired from the *Escuela Nacional de Idiomas de John Read*:

I was outraged! I didn't want to scandalize my children and ex-wife, but how could I allow this to go down without anything happening? I got together with several other teachers in the school . . . to complain about these teachers being fired without having any due process. Within two weeks, the two teachers were reinstated—again without any due process.

On an island where the revolutionary goal is producing “the new socialist man,” Basker realized that he would likely feel the wrath from authorities who seldom countenanced dissent. He soon relocated to Greenwich Village where he began attending Tuesday night discussion groups at which a new generation of homosexual youth talked about a gay revolution. Unlike homophile leaders such as Dorr Legg and others, wars of liberation, civil rights organizing, and student strikes linked Basker across the gay generational divide.

Several months after Stonewall, he returned to Miami and was reunited with his children. There, from time to time he'd also run into the former *Mattachine Florida* leader, Richard Inman, with whom he would discuss the prospects of bringing Stonewall south. Inman was then running his one-man organization, the *Florida League for Good Government*, and for a time also operated the *Atheneum Bookshop*, an X-rated bookstore on Miami's southwest side. The frequent subject of vice raids, Inman successfully fought them in the courts; when the 1960s ended, Inman moved to California.

The 1970s were marked by the growth of greater sexual freedom, elevated political consciousness, and the emergence of lesbian and gay communities in the South. In this atmosphere Basker found “more receptivity” in South Florida than he had before. In his speeches and his action he “married” individual self-interest to like-minded groups. “You don't widen your influence by being sectarian,” he argued. “For coalition purposes, you *always* have open arms.” At local gay bars, “I wouldn't talk about me. I'd talk about *you* and your needs.” Merging Saul Alinsky-style organizing with the

positive thinking of Dale Carnegie, Bob strategized: "When you get somebody with a resonance that sounds empathetic, you latch on to them. *And*, you use them for gathering others." Rejecting the single-issue position that was the hallmark of the New York-based Gay Activist Alliance, Basker preached "cross-pollination" in movements:

I still remember pushing memberships at gay meetings for the American Civil Liberties Union: "If we want their help, we got to help them! Don't limit your issues to just your own situation. Do you want people to come and support you? You're not going to get them to support you if you don't do something to help them on issues that are not contradictory to your own.

Basker practiced what he preached, laboring across sundry groups ranging from Citizens Against the Death Penalty to those working for migrant workers' rights. As chairman of the legislative committee for the Florida affiliate of the ACLU and a board member of the Dade County's Concerned Democrats, Basker "worked slowly, individually perhaps, to bring them along to make sure that the issues you believed in became common issues for the entire board." He also invested significant time as vice president of Transition, a program for soon-to-be released inmates, and was active in support of Haitian refugees.

Activities in Miami began to gel as the twin national political party conventions appeared on the city horizon. A small but determined group advanced "tactics toward the strategy to get the law changed," according to Basker, "setting all of the pawns in place for the grand move." In the late evening of November 6, 1971, the game began in earnest when law enforcement officials intervened.

Posing as patrons, Miami undercover agents entered the Bachelor II Lounge on SW Twenty-Second Street. Among other things they observed thirty-six-year-old Enrique Vela serving a drink to a fifty-something homosexual. A short time later police stormed into the Coral Way bar, arresting six, four of whom were employees. A disappointed sergeant later told a news reporter that "about fifty customers took off through the doors. Otherwise we would have had more homosexuals" (Patrus, 1971).

Unlike other bar raids that occurred as regularly as the winter migration of Yankee snowbirds, those arrested at the Bachelor II refused to retreat into their invisible subculture. They entered "not guilty" pleas in municipal court. Their attorney, Rose Levinson—like Pearl Hart in Chicago, a closet lesbian—had long represented gay men charged with various offenses. Levinson challenged the constitutionality of the ordinance.

Two weeks before Christmas Judge Donald Barmack tossed out the cases, declaring: "You cannot label a person a homosexual or a lesbian or a pervert and refuse to serve him or her a drink." Noting that neither Plato nor Oscar Wilde could legally visit a Miami bar, he continued: "You pass a law like this and pretty soon you can refuse to serve somebody because he's a Democrat or Republican or blue-eyed"(Glass, 1971). Later, the city quietly repealed the ordinance, and the Florida Supreme Court struck down the state's 103-year-old "crimes against nature" law for its "vagueness and uncertainty in language." A new era had begun.

Basker was the ringmaster for community organizing, starting and encouraging groups, networking with individuals, laboring across movement groups. By 1973 there were several Basker-organized or -inspired groups, ranging from Gay Activist Alliance—Miami which successfully had fought a local cross-dressing ordinance to the Miami chapter of the Metropolitan Community Church. Basker set his sights toward another goal: passage of a local ordinance barring discrimination against homosexuals similar to the one just passed by his ally Frank Kameny in Washington, DC.

Although similarly dressed gay men discoed at the Lost and Found just as they did at the Warehouse VIII and similarly undressed men cruised the Olympic Baths just as they were doing at Club Baths—Miami, South Florida was not the District of Columbia. Dade County, home to "Cubans and New York Jews on the retirement plan," was still held hostage by

good ol' boys [who] have Bible-totin' wives. Their religion, steaming in Florida's heady mixture of sunshine and swamp gas after 200 years of slow fermentation in the backwoods South, gets kid-glove treatment at all times. (Rose, 1977, p. 46)

Nevertheless, in 1973, Basker called for a "rebirth of activity and commitment" among South Florida activists. "Power concedes nothing without a demand," Basker quoted Frederick Douglass in the GAA Newsletter. "Find out just what people will submit to and you will find the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed on them." Four years later, the boy who read *Fighting Foes Too Small to See* as he waited to confront the injustice of his mother's arrest would confront forces of biblical proportion and, in the process, usher in the second wave of the modern gay rights movement.

Bob Basker died on April 6, 2001, at a home for the aged in San Francisco. He was eighty-two.

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