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## ESSAYS/PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

# The strongman

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Growing up on New York City's Lower East Side of the 1950s there were no other Breitbarts to be found, so it was not surprising that I would be drawn to the heroic legend of my famous ancestor and namesake, Siegmund (Zishe) Breitbart. My parents were survivors of the Holocaust, born in Turka, a small shtetl in Galicia, Poland, not far from the Lodz birthplace of the "greatest Jewish strongman—the modern Samson." Being related to the famous Jewish "Iron King" was, for me, a proud link to a legacy of strength, courage, and defiance in an environment scarred by the profound losses and overwhelming grief of my generation of "children of survivors." In 1994, I attended the International AIDS Congress in Berlin, and was the first Breitbart, to my knowledge, to visit Zishe's grave site in a small Jewish cemetery in the former East Berlin. Zishe Breitbart was a looming figure of strength in my subconscious.

Werner Herzog's recent film *Invincible* began playing in New York and Los Angeles in the fall of 2002. Roger Ebert, a discerning American film critic, gave it "two big thumbs up. One of the best films of the year!" *Invincible* is based on the story of Siegmund (Zishe) Breitbart, and so it stirred up many of my proud memories of being linked to this great Jewish historic and folkloric hero. I first learned of the film through one of my former fellows/trainees, Dr. Simon Wein, an Australian palliative care physician who was working in Israel after spending two years with us at Memorial in New York City. His son Jacob had responded to a casting call for the film, to play one of Zishe's younger brothers. In

fact Jacob plays a wonderful featured role in the film as Zishe's younger brother Benjamin, and several of the Wein children are in the film. I kept watch on the film's progress through contact with Simon as well as the internet site for *Invincible*. After a European debut to poor reviews, finally the film was to open in New York City. I had to see the film, but more importantly I needed to take my father, Moishe Breitbart, to see this film of his famous relative, Breitbart, the strongman.

My father was a puzzle to me until I was old enough to work with him. As manager of a famous Jewish dairy restaurant, Ratner's, for over 50 years, my father went to work before I woke for school and came home after I went to sleep. It wasn't until I started working as a busboy in my teens, and then as a waiter in the restaurant, that I began to understand my father's dedication to his responsibilities, his work, his family, his word, his name. Now 78 and dying slowly of advanced prostate cancer, this film was to immortalize the Breitbart legend. It was important for us to see this film together.

My wife Rachel, my son Sam, who is 11, and I met my Mom and Dad at Memorial Hospital, after Dad completed some medical tests, and we caught the 4 p.m. showing of *Invincible* at an Upper East Side movie house. We were excited. Sam sat next to his fragile grandfather (who he calls Zeide), holding his hand and occasionally rubbing his back to help ease any discomfort. We watched the film as if it were a baseball game and we were at Yankee Stadium. Every scene was commented on, every factual error was noted and corrected, a bit too loudly. At least one other movie patron turned and yelled at us to be quiet. We couldn't be quiet. That was our family's story being told up there on that screen, told and distorted and often factually incorrect.

My father chose Sam to be his primary student in a corrective history lesson. Zishe was a young

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blacksmith's apprentice in Lodz, Poland, who ran away with the Berlin-based Circus Busch when he was 11 years old, Sam's age. He developed a strongman act and became a world famous performer in the early 1920s. He toured all of Europe and even the United States, becoming world renowned for feats of amazing strength. Despite becoming a wealthy and privileged Berliner, Breitbart never forgot he was a Jew. He led the Jewish residents of Grandier Street in an armed uprising against anti-Semitic pogroms which took place in Berlin's Barn district in 1923. Despite Breitbart's incredible physical strength, he was ironically felled by what started out as a minor cut. While performing in the circus arena, Breitbart scratched his leg with a rusty nail that he pounded through a thick piece of wood, wrapped in sheet metal, with his bare hands. After several operations, all done to avoid amputation of his leg, Breitbart succumbed to infection, in an era prior to the availability of antibiotics, and died on October 12, 1925.

Those were the facts. "That's the real story," my father told Sam. "He was a strong man, and I was a strong man once also; ask your father!" Sam turned to look at me, as if asking for confirmation. I nodded. Sam kept holding his grandfather's shrunken hands, hands that once held me with enormous power. He looked into my father's now drawn and pale face. "You're still strong, Zeide; your love is so strong that I think I will still feel it when I am an old man." My father's eyes shone like shimmering pools of rain. He looked at me and he weakly whispered, "He's a Breitbart."

Several months later, on November 27, 2002, my father died at home, in his own bed. The night he died my mother slept beside him while I sat at his side, holding his hand all night as he labored to die. My brother Sheldon recites the Mourner's Kaddish three times a day, every day, to keep a vigil on his soul. I keep a vigil on his memory and his legacy.