

My Brother

**Michael David Magdoff
July 19, 1939 - July 7, 1959**

On the 80th anniversary of his birth

By

**Fred Magdoff
Based on remarks made at the memorial
held July 19, 2019 in Fletcher, Vermont**



I'm writing this mainly for myself, but perhaps others (including my descendants) might find it of interest. I am including information that I learned or found as I was preparing for the 2019 memorial to Mike. And looking this over I see that I circle back to a couple of topics, but I don't think it is too redundant to do so. I've also included small amounts of peripheral (perhaps extraneous) information that I wanted to write down. I'm including transcriptions of the eight letters that I have from him—they were all written during his first year at Oberlin College, all but one from the fall of 1956, the remaining one apparently around February 14 (Valentines Day) 1957. So that there will be a more complete record of his life in one place, I'm including some photos of Mike from different times in his life.

There is not much to say and yet there is so much to say. To know that my brother Mike died in 1959 just weeks before his 20th birthday is probably enough to gauge the impact on his family and friends. The death of a child is probably one of the worst events that can happen to parents and siblings. And it has lasting and profound impacts on close friends as well. As I was looking over files to get ready for the 2019 remembrance, I came across a notice placed in *The Worker* on July 7, 1963 by Beadie's parents, four years after Mike died. It gives an idea of the deep pain that persisted:

Four dreadful, painful years went by. Oh, how we miss
you, our beloved, wonderful Grandson

MICHAEL DAVID MAGDOFF

You will live in our hearts as long as we live.
Your grandparents

CARL & SYLVIA WEINSTEIN

The grief was so intense it was impossible to really talk about it among ourselves. He was gone and we missed him greatly. What else was there really to say?

Our parents were true New Yorkers, born and raised in the Bronx. But Mike was born in Philadelphia in 1939 where Harry was working on a WPA project measuring labor productivity. A few years later Harry was working directly for the national government and the young family—Harry, Beadie, and Michael— moved to Washington DC, where I was born in 1942. We then moved to Park Fairfax, Virginia, a development built for government workers during the Second World War, just outside of Washington. Mike went to 1st and 2nd grades to a newly started progressive school in Northern Virginia (Burgundy Farms, the first integrated school in Virginia, founded by Harold and Kathryn Stone (parents of Paul Stone,

former Vermont Agricultural Commissioner), the Rev. and Mrs. William Basom¹, concerned parents including Eric Sevareid² and my folks, and others.)

When Mike was 8 years old, Harry left the Commerce Department because the writing was on the wall—Averell Harriman had replaced Henry Wallace as Secretary of Commerce and the red scare was beginning. We moved from Northern Virginia to Queens New York—first to Astoria where we both of attended PS 122 (“All the monkeys in the zoo go to PS 122”). He went to grades 3, 4, and 5 at PS 122 and at some point he skipped a school year, but I don't know when it was. We then moved to Kew Garden Hills, and finally to Forest Hills where Mike went Halsey Junior High School and graduated from Forest Hills High in 1956. At age 17 he entered Oberlin College (along with two high school friends—Peter Kahn and David Sigman) in the fall of 1956 and was at the end of junior year, just a few weeks shy of his 20th birthday, when he died of cancer on July 7th (?) 1959.

Mike was about 3 years older than me. The three different Queens apartments we lived in were all very small, but each had two bedrooms. Mike and I slept in the same room until he was a senior in high school when somehow he got materials and walled off a part of an unfinished basement of our garden style apartment in Forest Hills and moved downstairs. (The move to Forest Hills was precipitated by us being kicked out of our Kew Garden Hills apartment after Harry was called before a grand jury in New York during the witch hunt, making the front page of the newspapers. A right wing group sent around a circular about the grand jury appearance with a note on top saying something to the effect of “Look who’s living in your neighborhood.”) Sometimes in the evening I would go down to his “room” in the basement and we would listen to AM radio coming from far away. We could listened to WWVA from Wheeling, West Virginia, a country and western station and other seemingly exotic stations.

There is no doubt that for some years I was a colossal pain in the ass to my older brother. Sibling rivalry?? Who knows? After all, I was a generally rambunctious youngster. But later we began getting closer, especially during the last years when he was in college and I was in high school. Home on vacation, he took me to a hootenanny at the Knights of Pythias hall on West 70th street in Manhattan (Pete Seeger was probably the main attraction, but there were many other performers such as Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry). It was an introduction to live performance of folk music that would be such an important part of my life for years to come. He also took me and the daughter of our parent’s friends to The Weaver’s Christmas Eve concert (probably 1957, but could have been 1955 when Mike was a

¹ Bill Basom was the founder and longtime pastor of Beverly Hills Community Church, a congregation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Alexandria. He convinced Harry to lead a men’s discussion group at the Church and I attended the Church nursery school.

² Author and CBS news commentator, member of “Murrow’s Boys” during the Second World War.

high school senior). We sat in the last row of the last balcony of Carnegie Hall and could barely see four tiny people on stage—but it was wonderful and exciting to be there.

Mike played the clarinet in high school, enjoyed playing baseball, and was on the high school swimming team. He was also on the swim team at Oberlin as well as JV soccer. He encouraged my swimming and got me involved with a local WMCA swimming team, and was always interested in how I was doing when I was on the Forest Hills High School team. Once, probably in the fall of 1958, I went out to Oberlin alone (the first time I ever was in an airplane) and Mike and a friend picked me up at the Cleveland airport. One of the things I did, at his urging, was to swim for the coach at Oberlin after one of their meets. He thought I needed all the help I could get to be admitted to Oberlin and if coach Bibler was impressed it might help my admission to the school. It's interesting that while I was a better swimmer than Mike, the few times we raced against each other, I never beat him. He was my older brother, after all, and I presume there was a psychological reason for it. When he was home and very sick, he and Harry went to a swim meet of mine: Forest Hills vs. Brooklyn Tech—the only time either of my parents attended a swim meet. (If I had won my race we would have won the meet. But I was up against one of the best high school swimmers in New York and came in second.)

As I mentioned previously, we fought (argued?) a fair amount when we were young. I think it was normal sibling stuff. But he looked out for me as we grew older and we became even closer when he went away to college and I was in high school. He wrote to me frequently and I visited him twice in Oberlin. I knew I had letters that Mike had written to me from college. But looking over them while preparing for the 2019 memorial I found that the letters I still had, all eight of them, were written during a very short period, most during his first semester away at school, from September to December of 1956. He wrote nearly every week, beginning right after college orientation as classes were set to begin. I obviously wrote back, but don't recall doing so.

He wrote about all sorts of things, including correcting spelling in my letters to him (although I found plenty of spelling mistakes in his letters to me, at the time I wouldn't have known the difference). About a discussion group that was formed, a visit by Martin Luther King, Pete Seeger singing on campus, the Weavers were scheduled to come to Oberlin in the spring, about dating and “playing the field”, about meeting someone who had been a counselor at Camp Woodlands and knew my girlfriend Paula, asking about our parents, about how bad the “honor” system was at Oberlin (the system was based on informing on others who cheated on tests), writing a paper on the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) and wondering if Harry had information about it. He signed most of his letters with “Your Brother, Mike.”

During the winter of 1958/59 we made plans to go to Europe together in the summer of 1959 after I graduated high school and he was going to be between junior and senior year of college. We were going to go to the world youth festival in

Czechoslovakia and then planned to hitchhike around the continent. But Mike came home from Oberlin in the early spring of 1959 with a cancer in his leg that eventually spread to his lungs. I expect that a person with the same disease today would be successfully treated, even cured. The treatment he received was radiation for his leg and I'm not sure if anything was done for the lungs. (When we lived in Virginia in the 1940s we were visiting family friends when Mike rolled down a hill by their house with a role of toy gun caps in his pants pocket. The caps went off, causing severe (3rd degree) burns on his thigh. I've always wondered whether that injury set the stage for cancer to develop. I think that it was the same thigh that was hurt in a soccer injury at Oberlin that seemed to precipitate the cancer.)

In those years patients weren't told that they were dying and my parents never told me for fear I might tell Mike by mistake. Instead of going to Europe with Mike, and not knowing how sick he was, I felt I just needed to get away. I travelled via ride, hitchhiking, and bus to San Francisco where I stayed with Harry's cousin Fay and her husband Jack Kalic above their F&J Groceteria on Masonic Avenue, near the panhandle of Golden Gate Park. As I was getting ready to leave for Washington State to volunteer to fight forest fires I received a phone call from my uncle Sam Magdoff indicating that I should come home. I took a train to Chicago where I was met by Susan Needleman and her husband. They took me right to the airport and I flew to LaGuardia in New York, arriving in the morning, just hours after Mike died. Sam picked me up and drove me to the Manhattan apartment of Kappy and Dorothy Kaplan on the corner of West 96th st. and Central Park West, where my parents were. I remember little about that day except feeling absolutely dazed, but I did go for a long walk with David Needleman.

I was told little about his last days and, to be truthful, I didn't really want to hear a lot about it—it was just too painful. But I knew that he had been given morphine (thankfully) and years later Harry told me that the night before Mike died Beadie got into his bed and they talked about all sorts of things. He was probably hallucinating because of the morphine, and he talked of seeing all sorts of beautiful colors.

I remember little about the memorial for Mike, in July 1959, held in a chapel on Manhattan's west side. I do remember a crowd of people, the yellow school bus that came in from Mohegan Colony Day Camp where Mike had been a camper and then a counselor for many years. I remember Mike's friends being there and Lillian Freundlich, a pianist and friend of my parents, playing the part of Bach's cantata #147 that was scored for piano. Mike's friend Peter Kahn recently told me that Lillian also played another piece, by Beethoven.

After the memorial for Mike, there was little discussion of him in the family. Each of us suffered our own grief. In reality, what was there to say? We missed him terribly and there was nothing we could do to either bring him back or reduce each other's suffering. And I felt survivor's guilt. Mike had looked a bit like Beadie and they had become good friends and talked a lot. I looked more like Harry and had more of an affinity for him and rebelled against what I took as Beadie's intrusiveness and

bossiness in my life. So while I know that Harry was devastated by the loss, it must have been worse for my mother. After a number of years Harry could become absorbed in his work, on the U.S. economy, and a decade after Mike's death *The Age of Imperialism* was published. While Beadie worked in the years following Mike's death (she couldn't go back to the classroom and stopped teaching, going to work with Harry selling life insurance and pension plans to individuals and a variety of groups, mainly unions), I don't think she had anything that she could become completely absorbed in at that time. And I found it very difficult to relate to her for years, actually decades to come. Looking back, I wish I could have been more of a comfort to her. But I think that their natural outgoingness and wide circle of friends, that became even larger after Harry became co-editor of *Monthly Review* in 1969, helped both of them. Once Harry was at MR, Beadie went down to the office regularly (and was a big help) and all the interactions with people and feeling a strong purpose must have helped her greatly.

I don't think that Mike was exactly a "lady's man" but he had a number of girlfriends. The last was fellow Oberlin student, Marilyn Mattson. She contacted Harry and Beadie after Mike died (I think it was a few weeks afterwards before she found out what had happened) and in the late 1980s sent me a letter. She lived just outside of Washington DC and when Amy and I were in West Virginia for a meeting we arranged to have lunch with her at Harper's Ferry. I later had dinner with her one evening. She had a son and was divorced and clearly wondering whether she would have had a happier life if Mike had lived and they had gotten married. I guess he was pretty serious about her. Would Mike have become a math teacher (he was thinking about it) and raised a family with Marilyn?

There much more that I can say, but I think it best to summarize: all who knew him believed that Mike was a sweet and decent young man, very concerned with issues of civil liberties and civil rights and devoted to his family and friends. His death devastated the family. I miss Mike to this day, both as a person and as a brother. The pain of such a loss never goes away, but it becomes easier to bear as time passes.

There is a folk song that was sung at many a hootenanny in the late 1950s and was sung by my good friend Ruth (Opler) Perry at her brother's memorial. I think the chorus from the song is a fitting way to end to this short note.

*Passing through, passing through
Sometimes happy, sometimes blue
Glad that I ran into you
We're all brothers and we're only passing through*

I'm certainly glad that I ran into you, Mike.

Your Brother,
Fred

Letters from Mike's first year at Oberlin College (1956-57).

*These are all the letters that I have. Somehow they remained after all these years. Keep in mind that this is a 17 year old writing to a 14 year old. All but one are from his first semester (Sept. – Dec. 1956). Only one is dated, the rest just have the day of the week it was written. The first was written on Mon. and in an envelope postmarked Sept. 18 (a Tuesday). The other postmarks are September 21 and 27, October 1, 8, and 25, November 12, December 3 and 7. (nine envelopes and 8 letters, and one apparently written in February 1957) All had return address of Magdoff, Wilder Hall-216, Oberlin College, Oberlin Ohio. All but one were written on Oberlin College stationery. Some small corrections have been made but I reproduced his use of caps and underlines—
FRED*

Mon.

Dear Fred,

Vacation's over, classes start tomorrow. The orientation week was lots of fun, but tomorrow looks like a grind. I talked to the local doctor and he said it's alright to play soccer, so I may go out for it. Please tell Mom and Pop and tell me if they are very opposed.³ Also [ask] them to send
a) metal thing for inside chinos⁴
b) jewelry box⁵
c) tell Mom to call Mary [Lewis?, friend and director of Mohegan Colony Day Camp] and Mrs. Cohn [good friend of our grandmother Sheiva] (at Je-8-1552). Tell Mrs. Cohn about your not wanting to and say I'll call when I'm in for Thanksgiving.

I've changed my program and now taking Chem, History, Math 3,4 and Eng Comp. If you're on an athletic team you don't have to take phys education. I meet a girl from camp Woodlands who knows you and Paula.⁶ She was assistant water front counselor. Knows the swimming team!!! And give my best wishes to Mr Maré⁷ and the rest of the team.

Write about school, swimming, etc.

Your Brother
Mike

³ Mike had badly sprained his neck the previous summer (I think) while diving in the lake at Mohegan at too steep an angle and hitting the bottom. He wore a metal brace for some period afterwards.

⁴ These were metal forms that were put inside chinos (pants) to reduce wrinkling when they were drying after washing.

⁵ Perhaps containing a tie clasp? Maybe cufflinks?

⁶ Paula was my first real girlfriend in the way that word is used. But Vicki K. was my first very good friend who was a girl.

⁷ The coach of the Forest Hills High School swimming team

Sept 27,
Thurs.

Dear Fred,

I'm sorry that I don't have time to write more but on some days the work piles on, and on some believe it or not I have five free min. Today is not one of those days. Tell Pop I just read the about the German invasion of the Roman empire in about 400 A.D. Also tell Mom that my to o too [not clear] is because of the typewriter. Just thought you would like to see this. I found it fascinating and I'm sure you will too. [I have no idea what was enclosed.]

Write Soon
Your Loving Brother
Mike

Mon.

Dear Fred,

I switched from goalie to fullback. It's more fun and it puts you more into the game [soccer]. We really work out here and you really know when you're in condition. According to Mom you're working hard at it. I had Mr. Bartlett for English. He is and E. B. White fan. If you want, the A. B. C. of Security, a poem by E. B. White it's in the top drawer of my desk in the red dish. In the second desk drawer is the jewelry I want [you to] tell Mom.

I'm working hard but things have toned down a bit. I just handed in my first theme [assigned essay or paper—apparently for Eng. Comp. class]. I wrote it on how we started the youth group in the country [Mohegan Colony]. By the way have you been there recently?

I get the times [New York Times] every day so I read about Harry Bridges. I have to pay 10 ¢ a copy. I'm sure if you ask for another copy of the [Forest Hill High School] Beacon you could get it. Either from your section teacher or the Beacon office.

I have to get back to my work.

Your Brother
Mike

P.S. Pete Seeger is coming for two concerts later this month [October].

Mon, noon

Dear Fred,

Just received your letter and the story about the boy really gave me the chills. Listen, your math teacher is a shit!; let Dad teach you the math. She doesn't know her ass from her elbow. It's not hard once you get the knack of it. Also work on your Fr. **[French]** The harder you work now the less you will have to in college.

I'm racking up so far in Chem and Math. Hist is O. K., I've just had one ...and I'm sure I did well on it. In English I just got back my first theme with a b (about 70%). But most of the errors were on punctuation and spelling which can be corrected with practice and more careful rereading. He said the content was good.

My social life is O. K. I've gotten a letter from Sara and from Walt's sister. I went out a few times with that girl Ricky from Woodlands [Erica Sherover, later married to Herbert Marcuse] and the last two weeks had a date with a girl named Brenda who that woman (Marsh Crystal) from Mohegan told me to look up. I also took out her roommate. I'm really playing the field.

By the way, sure us spelt sure not shure.

How is Pop's business [insurance?]? Nobody has written about it? Bob Jonass wrote me that Paula is crazy about you but I guess you know that anyway.

Write soon

Mike

Sun. nite

Dear Fred,

How about more legible letters. Next time sit up when you write. What times are you hitting in swimming? Also tell me what the other kids are hitting. If possible could you send the clippings of the meets from the Queens Post? My first soccer game is on tues. It's the J.V. against a prep school from Cleveland. They're very good. But time will tell.

I'm writing from the Allen Art Museum. Every Sun night they have record concerts. Last night Pete Seeger was here⁸, and was great. Tell Sam he said the movie came out great.⁹

Sorry to hear that your Fr. is not too hot. I hope the vocab. cards helped. I also want to use them when I get home so take care of them.

Last night I had a date with a girl from Great Neck named Mary. She's a friend of the Bristels [not clear]. The only catch is that she'll be 19 almost two months before I'll be eighteen. Personally you act years older than she does.

I'm working like a dog. Some days 12 hrs a day and some less. I try to get my work done ahead of time. That way when big themes [essays] and blue books [exams] come up I have time to work on them.

Write soon (at a desk)

Mike

⁸ Pete's concert was on October 20, a Saturday (according to Joe Hickerson, <https://www.portlandfolkmusic.org/Joe3.php>)

⁹ Sam Magdoff (Harry's brother) visited Pete at his home in Beacon, NY in the summer of 1956 (took me along too) to help him edit the film he did about the steel drum instruments made from oil barrels in the Caribbean.

Sun nite

Dear Fred,

I'm sorry I'm so delinquent in writing, I just haven't had time. Now I've got a list of about seven people to whom I owe letters. The soccer season is about ended. Tomorrow the J.V. plays the varsity. I hope to play well and make next years varsity. Swimming starts two days before Thanksgiving. For a while last week it looked like I wouldn't be home but I got a ride after two of my friends decided to hitchhike to Pittsburg [feeing up space in a car?].

I have to return to the gym for three days of sex lectures. All freshmen have to have them. If you miss any you have to make them up next year. My work is really going to pile on over next weekend. On Mon I have a bluebook¹⁰ in math. On tues I have a bluebook in Chem and on Wed I have an English theme due. I hope to write the theme before the weekend so I'll just have to rewrite it on Tues. night.

I guess I'll be seeing you soon.

Mike

¹⁰ These were the standard format booklets with blue covers for tests at Oberlin.

Fri. MORNING

Dear Fred,

Congratulations, what time did you hit at Jackson [Jackson Heights High School]. I imagine everyone felt great. Tell Bobby Mussoff hello. You will have already beat (or lost to) Bayside [Bayside High School] when this letter comes. But they always have a tough team. It seems as if Dan Gold is doing O. K. for himself.¹¹ I think next year you ought to be able to take Bayside.¹² Now that, that's over with.

You shit you'll never get a swimming scholarship to Yale with an 80 average. I guess you'll have to be satisfied with a scholarship to Ohio State. I would like tickets for the boat I think. IF I can't use them all I'll sell them. I haven't had a date since I've been back [from Thanksgiving?]. I just don't feel like it. As a matter of fact, my whole section in the dorm was dateless last week except for one guy (out of 21).

I should be doing my Math but I just felt like writing. My swimming times are lousy. But they have a great discovery out here for the eyes. Use Mineral Oil a drop or two in each eye before you go in [the pool] and your eyes don't bother you at all.¹³ Tell Mr. Maré.¹⁴

I just got a letter from Judy Shepard, which I cant understand for the life of me. I still don't know if I'm flying or driving home. I'll write and tell.

Mike

P.S. I took my Ohio Drivers Test yesterday and passed every part except the parking. All I have to do is park next Fri and I'll have a license to drive in N.Y.C. during vacation. Keep your fingers crossed.¹⁵

¹¹ I assume Dan was a swimmer for Bayside.

¹² Mike was right. We did beat Bayside, but it may have been two years later.

¹³ After swimming for hours in a highly chlorinated pool, it felt like there were particles of sand in your eyes. Your eyes also became very light sensitive—like making the discomfort worse and causing tearing.

¹⁴ Coach of Forest Hills High School swimming team.

¹⁵ Mike had a New York State junior license at 16, allowing him to drive anywhere in NY State during daylight hours *except* New York City. He was 17 years old when this was written and wouldn't turn 18 (and get a full senior license) until July 1957.

Fri. eve.

Freddy,

I just had [not clear] evening; I went to the movie, but the lights blew half way through and I didn't see the end. What came after was even greater, we went to a soda fountain and I met the kid from Nicaragua and his roommate who is a senior at the college and he wants to be a Quaker minister (he is Methodist) and is going to Yale Ministry School next year. We discussed Rev. King's (he visited Oberlin) 3 talks and what he meant by patriotism and what were his theological ideas. King explained everything in terms of religion and then defined religion in terms of all mens beliefs; from the atheist to the most orthodox person. I probably will go to some Quaker meetings when I'm here. If I don't have time I really plan to go with you when I get home.¹⁶ I had the same feeling about Quakers also, after I saw "Friendly Persuasion". You might also read some of the Quaker Service pamphlets they are quite interesting.

I really got down to work after I called but have tapered off toward the end of the week, I'll start again soon. Today I got my only valentine from Sara of all people. I was really shocked! She said she would write, only time will tell. (Of course, I sent her a sweat shirt and she was obligated to write, but it was a surprise anyway). I have been going out a lot with girls believe it or not[,] so has Paul & Pete Kalin, boy oh boy? Louise¹⁷ hasn't written but who cares, life is great.

We had a meeting of the discussion group (the one I started) on Wed and it really seems to be catching on. Next week we're discussing the Honor system at Oberlin. I personally think it is quite crappy since it is based on the theory that you won't cheat if your neighbor spies. It is based on the informer system. I feel instead that should be purely on honor, for everyone knows why they are at college and if the don't, cheating won't help.

The Weavers are coming out to school on March 28, REALLY GREAT NEWS!!!

I'm writing my paper on the C.C.C. youth xxx xxxx,[not clear] ask pop if he has any information. I've got plenty at school.

Write soon
Your Brother,
Mike

¹⁶ I was attending Quaker meetings for a while in the Flushing section of Queens (NY)—in a meetinghouse built at the end of the 17th century.

¹⁷ Maybe Louise Sweet

PHOTOS

First few years (to about 4 years old)

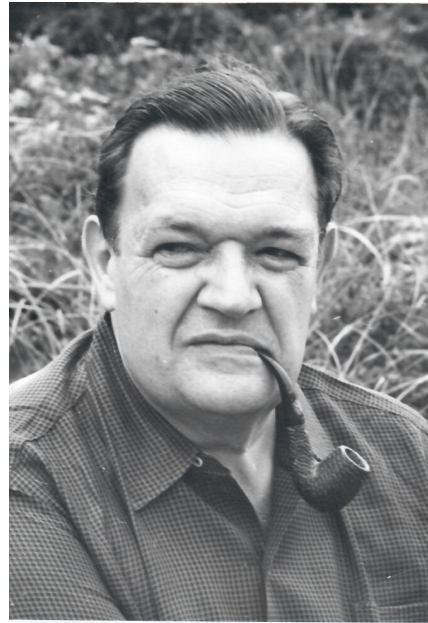


Infant Mike with Beadie and Grandmothers Shieva (Sylvia)Weinstein (left) and Laika Magdoff (right)

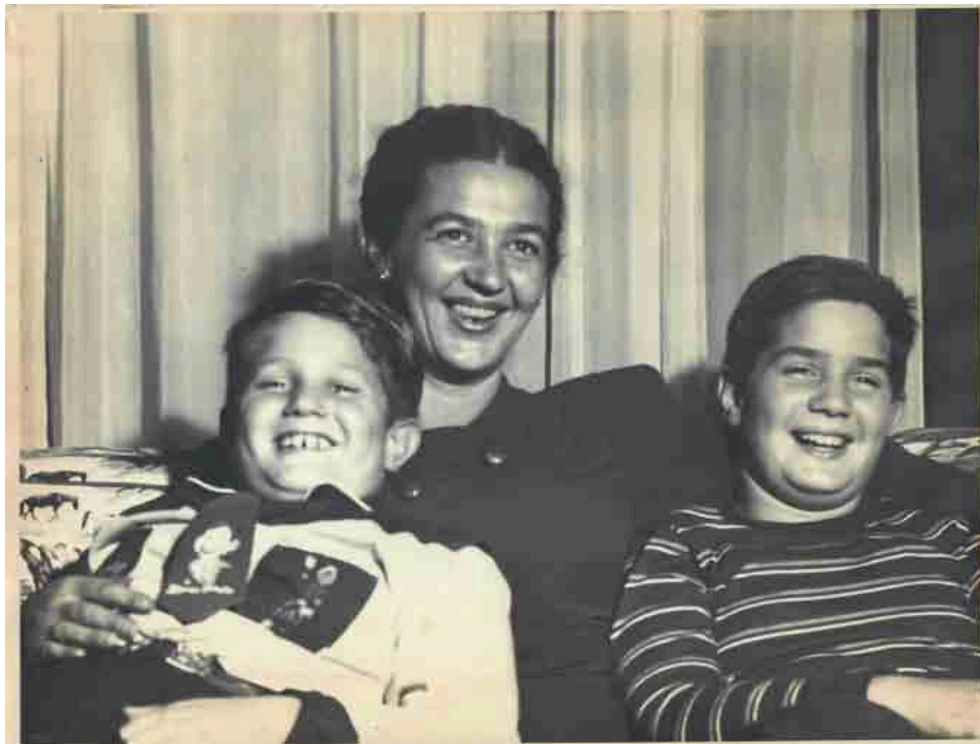


Mike at about 3 and 1/2 years old with his kid brother.

Pre-teen years



I figured that there should be a picture of Harry from that time in this document



Fred, Mom, and Mike

Early teens



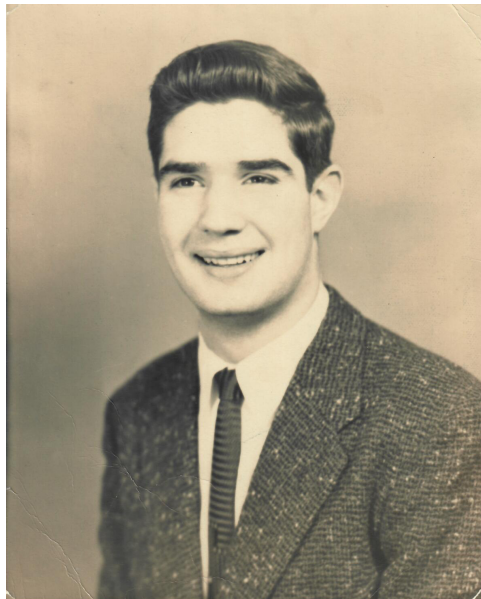
During school vacations, Beadie would take us for a trip. Since she was a teacher she had off during our vacations. On this one we were heading to visit friends in Virginia.

One of my favorite photos of Mike is at left with arm around me. Harry is getting the car ready for us.

Photo below is on a ferry on from the same trip.



Mid to late teens



December 1956



Mike with our grandparents Carl and Sheiva (Sylvia) Weinstein at the summer cottage in Mohegan Colony, NY (near Peekskill) where we spent almost every summer while growing up.



Mike (second from left) with other Oberlin College students in 1958, discussing plans to participate in Five College Conference being held at Denison College.



Staff members of Mohegan Colony Day Camp. I am the 5th from the left in the last row. Mike is beside me, 6th from the left.

Photo display at memorial in Fletcher, Vermont
July 19, 2019

