

Saul Wellman: War vet, Communist Party leader

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Saul Wellman was a revolutionary who didn't fit the stereotype of a radical.

He was a Communist, yet he had only kind words for one of the prosecutors who helped convict him of advocating the violent overthrow of the government.

Mr. Wellman was 90 and died Wednesday in an Ann Arbor hospice after suffering a stroke in November.

A longtime union organizer, Mr. Wellman was twice a soldier and after leaving the Communist Party in 1958, he learned a new trade -- printing -- and found he was sought after by many young liberal and left-leaning people seeking a mentor.

Mr. Wellman, a veteran of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and a 101st Airborne paratrooper who parachuted into Holland in World War II, was glad to be that mentor, said Wayne State University professor Ron Aronson.

Aronson, who is working on a documentary film about Mr. Wellman's life, said he was one of the young people who benefited from Mr. Wellman's advice.

Mr. Wellman was dedicated to the idea that human beings are created equal, said Aronson.

Aronson recalled that Mr. Wellman often said: "I want things to change where the playing field is leveled, where equality emerges as a reality, where the horrible things about inequities are eliminated."

Mr. Wellman was born in Elizabeth, N.J., on Aug. 18, 1913. His mother was a trade union organizer and Mr. Wellman joined the Young Communist League at age 16, organizing truck drivers in New York. In 1934, Mr. Wellman met another organizer, Peggy Hobson, and they were married.

But Mr. Wellman saw the rise of fascism in Italy, Spain and Germany and decided to do something about it. He was among a few thousand poorly trained foreigners who fought on the Republican side in Spain. Mr. Wellman was wounded and returned home.

In World War II, Mr. Wellman was old for a soldier. But at age 30, he was accepted into the 101st Airborne Division. He parachuted into Holland, fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was briefly captured by the Germans.

He'd been wounded with a piece of German shrapnel in his heart, but managed to roll off a stretcher and into a woods where he was later found by Americans.

In the late 1940s, Mr. Wellman became acting head of the Michigan Communist Party. U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy's rabid anticommunism was in full swing in the early 1950s and Mr. Wellman was arrested and eventually convicted under the Smith Act of advocating the forcible overthrow of the government.

He spent about six months in prison. In 1958, the U.S. Supreme Court found the Smith Act unconstitutional. But by then, Mr. Wellman was disillusioned by the excesses of Stalinism.

Meanwhile, the anti-Vietnam War movement and the civil rights movement had begun in the 1960s and 1970s, and when Mr. Wellman went to rallies, he found people seeking him as a mentor.

Mr. Wellman had no bitterness about his prosecution and had kind words for the late U.S. Sen. Phil Hart, who prosecuted him.

Of Hart, who said he regretted having prosecuted Mr. Wellman, the revolutionary said, "As a matter of fact, I voted for Hart when he ran for lieutenant governor in 1954. I can't and won't say anything bad about him."

Mr. Wellman's daughter, Vickie Wellman of Ann Arbor, said her father was touched in 1996 when he returned to Spain for a reunion of Civil War veterans and was made a citizen.

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Wellman is survived by a son, David, three grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Plans for a memorial service were incomplete on Thursday.

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