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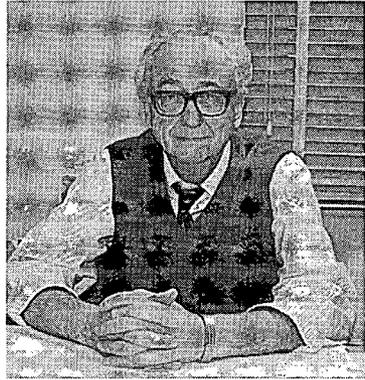
Ferenc Morton Szasz (1940–2010)

PASÓ POR AQUÍ

Richard W. Etulain

For two full generations Ferenc (Frank) Morton Szasz profoundly influenced the lives of thousands of students and colleagues at the University of New Mexico (UNM). From his arrival at UNM in 1967 until his untimely death from leukemia on 20 June 2010, Frank Szasz, in his classroom lectures, his seminars, and in his connections with other professors, markedly shaped the UNM Department of History. And in his writings, particularly in the fields of American religion and science and popular culture, his influence reached out to untold numbers of readers.

Born on 14 February 1940 in Davenport, Iowa, Szasz was the son of Ferenc Paul Szasz, an immigrant engineer, and Mary Plummer Szasz, a high school English teacher. Early on he became a voracious reader, his interests including a huge number of comic books. After completing public schools in Bucyrus, Ohio, Szasz enrolled in nearby Ohio Wesleyan University and, through the molding influence



ILL. 1. FERENC MORTON SZASZ
(*Photograph courtesy University of New Mexico Department of History*)

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of Professor Richard W. Smith, graduated with a history major. Next came graduate school at the University of Rochester in New York, where he specialized in American social and intellectual history under the tutelage of Milton Berman and Hayden White, among others. His doctoral dissertation, which focused on the “divided mind” of American Protestantism from 1880 to 1930, eventually became his first book.¹

Even before Frank completed his dissertation, he landed a fill-in position at UNM in Albuquerque in 1967. The temporary slot turned into a full-time position, and Szasz never left UNM. He was teaching at the university when the serious illness overtook him.

Szasz quickly gained the reputation of a warm, encouraging classroom instructor. Gradually, his enrollments increased until his survey and upper-division courses were “packed out.” In addition to the introductory survey of U.S. history, he offered a two-semester sequence in American social and intellectual history and, along the way, gave courses on American religions and historical biography. After his colleague Gerald Nash retired, Szasz also took over the huge World War II course they had previously team taught.

As he did in his writing, Szasz larded his lectures with stories, pen portraits, and vignettes. His lecture notes were a wonder to behold. They began with his packed, unreadable hand-written scribbles on legal-size yellow sheets and cascaded with frequent stapled emendations eventuating in lengthy, unwieldy sheets no one else could have used, let alone read. Even Szasz admitted to his abominable pen tracks, thanking two persons on one occasion for “deciphering my handwriting, some of which, I discovered, I couldn’t read myself.”²

A key shaping influence in Frank’s further education was his fruitful year spent as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Exeter in England during 1984–1985. His teaching of English students, his work with erudite colleagues, and his travel in Great Britain and on the European continent—all these experiences broadened his perspectives, deepened his thinking, and challenged his work as a professional historian.

Frank launched his publication career with a monograph on the history of American religion. After several delays, his much revised dissertation appeared as *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880–1930* in 1982. It was a valuable study of the enormous impact of higher criticism, modernism, and Darwinian evolution in that explosive conflict among American Protestants, particularly among Mainline Protestants and fundamentalists and evangelicals. A half-dozen years later in 1988, he published another valuable monograph, *The Protestant Clergy in the Great Plains and Mountain West, 1865–1915*. He had undertaken this volume, he told an interviewer, because churches were such important community builders and refuges for Plains peoples.³

The most significant of Szasz's studies of religion in the United States is his *Religion in the Modern American West* published in 2000. This notable work, the best examination available on the subject, clearly illustrates his research and writing strategies. Szasz makes abundant uses of published books and essays, newspapers, and manuscript sources. But he also cites illuminating ephemeral sources gathered during his career-long plundering of vertical files at libraries and historical societies. Equally notable is the author's balance. He deals with multiple church and nonchurch groups, a full run of denominations, Jewish and Asian groups, and alternate faiths; but no discernable bias undermines any of his discussions. Here, and throughout his career, Szasz avoided taking sides in historical arguments.⁴

Although some of these essays and books on American religion dealt glancingly with scientific topics, Szasz gradually began to explore this subject after residing several years in New Mexico in the shadows of one of the country's most important concentrations of science and technology. (I often teased Szasz that he did religion and science but not in the same book.) This new interest surfaced with a huge bang in his smoothly written volume *The Day the Sun Rose Twice: The Story of the Trinity Site Nuclear Explosion July 16, 1945*, appearing in 1984. It became Szasz's best selling volume, widely and positively reviewed and adopted in many classrooms. Readers soon discovered that Szasz could deal vividly and invitingly with complex scientific subjects. The *New York Times* reviewer called the volume a "tightly focused, lucidly written and thoroughly researched book" that provided a "concise and cogent [overview], a valuable introduction to how our nuclear dilemma began."⁵

Szasz continued and expanded his work on science in the American West. An important outcome of that mushrooming interest was his book *The British Scientists and the Manhattan Project: The Los Alamos Years* (1992). As Szasz told one journalist, his own background as an immigrant's son and his fascination with the general subject made this topic particularly appealing to him.⁶ Along the way, he also wrote several essays on other New Mexico scientific topics, some of which were gathered in *Larger Than Life: New Mexico in the Twentieth Century* published in 2006. In the last year of his life, Szasz completed a manuscript that united two of his interests, nuclear science and comic books; the book, tentatively titled "Atomic Comics," is under consideration at a university press.

Throughout his life, Szasz also nourished a strong interest in the life and career of Abraham Lincoln. First as a boy and later as a practicing historian, Szasz read numerous books on Lincoln and made presentations on that topic before dozens of audiences in New Mexico. After Szasz began regularly visiting Scotland with his wife Margaret and wrote *Scots in the North American*

West, 1790–1917 (2000), he decided to join two of his fascinations: Scotland and Abraham Lincoln. The result was an intriguing and helpful work of comparative history, *Abraham Lincoln and Robert Burns: Connected Lives and Legends*, which appeared in 2008 during the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. This expanding interest in Abraham Lincoln continued into his final days, with Szasz drafting a book on Lincoln and religion while in the hospital for chemotherapy treatment.

Perhaps even more significant, although less quantifiable, are Frank's personal influences on his students and colleagues. He practiced peace and kindness. His family summed up his character: "the secret of his appeal lay in his compassion, knowledge, ability to listen, his honesty, his humility and his sense of humor."⁷⁷ To the multitudes of students he taught—perhaps more than twenty thousand in forty-three years in the classroom—he became a friend, an encourager, an older brother, perhaps even an indulgent father figure. In my twenty years as his colleague, I never saw Frank foment conflict; instead, he avoided divisive issues in his classes, departmental meetings, and collegial relationships. Graduate students came to know that he would encourage and support their efforts and find ways to steer them away from the numerous shoals threatening their careers and down avenues that led to the completion of their master's or doctoral degrees. Undergraduates and graduate students lined up for his courses or at his door for informative lectures, helpful seminars, and, above all, kind words.

A key to Szasz's winsome relationships was his indefatigable sense of humor. He loved the phrases of comic books: 'em, ahem, er, zip, zap, gadzooks, and even an occasional shazam. He often would say, "Dick, have you heard the one about . . ." and out would come a schmaltzy story bringing widespread chuckles. There was, too, the story of his reading manuscripts to his rabbit in the backyard. But, Frank confessed, when some unkind predator snatched away his lop-eared companion, his prose style deteriorated—noticeably. Soon after my family moved to Albuquerque, we heard a strange buzzing in the trees. Yep, Frank told us, that happened every year about this time. The maestro struck up the beat with "a vone, a two, a three," and kept up the rhythm and cicada noise for the next three or four months.

Frank's boyish ways showed up in his love for comic books, children's literature, and folk tales (e.g., Aesop's fables). He often recalled these childhood and boyhood readings and put them variously to work. For example, he saw the perfect fit for Eeyore, the grumbling, pessimistic donkey in Winnie the Pooh stories, in one of our down-at-the-mouth history colleagues.

Frank was a master storyteller, one who savored jokes and chuckles. Once, he asked my librarian wife, Joyce, and our librarian daughter, Jackie,

to read a collection of animal tales he had written and, we were informed, had first been told to his daughter Maria. Joyce and Jackie were smitten with the delightful tales, urging Frank—twice, in fact—to see the collection into print. Joyce even used the stories to positive effect in her elementary library classes. She and her students thought them remarkably similar to the classic Frog and Toad yarns.

My favorite Frank Szasz story emerges from a conversation he had with my wife. Hearing that Frank frequented the Albuquerque flea market each Saturday morning to snatch up used books he later sold to the city's bookdealers, Joyce asked him if he would keep an eye out for the missing issues in her Pillsbury Bakeoff cookbook collection. "Oh Joyce," he told her, "I can't do that." Holding up a limp wrist, he explained, "Some of those guys selling those books are big bruisers, and I couldn't say to them, 'Here, let me get into my purse to tell you what volumes I need.'" We teased him about the way he spent his Saturday mornings for a few dollars; he could make more working at a local McDonalds. "You miss the point," he responded. And we had.

I recall, with unavoidable recollection, that I once disappointed Frank. He enjoyed giving presentations throughout New Mexico on Abraham Lincoln, which the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities sponsored. I thought he wanted a respite from the talks, and I did not push for renewal of his program for the next year. When notified that his Lincoln presentation would not be continued, he expressed great disappointment. And I realized that I, largely, had been the cause of the nonrenewal. I admitted my role to him and knew his letdown. To disappoint Frank like that was depressing. I vowed it would never happen again, but the dark memory remains.

Frank rarely philosophized about life, his teaching and writing, or the historical profession. He did not aim at cutting-edge or pathbreaking historical studies, even though some of his publications covered or uncovered new subjects. He preferred, instead, to tell informational stories that readers could understand and enjoy. Still, on a few occasions he expressed himself on larger issues. He told David Holtby, his friend and long-time editor at the University of New Mexico Press, that he was intrigued with "ultimate questions": "one about our future as a people and [the] other about our individual destinies." "Atomic energy and its potential for total destruction and religion and its potential for redemption and eternal life"—those were among the "ultimate questions," Frank believed.⁸

For nearly thirty years, I enjoyed the warm friendship of Frank Szasz. We edited two books together, exchanged essays to read (he was a superb reader of manuscripts), and nourished a mutual bibliomania.⁹ As he did for so many others, Frank chuckled his way into my mind and heart. A tall, slim, willowy

man, he had a huge, warm, and expansive spirit. Mention Frank Szasz and smiles capture the scene. His interests were catholic, his energy inviting and encouraging, and his drive dynamic. What Doris Kearns Goodwin said of Szasz's hero Abraham Lincoln was also true of Frank: he was "a man of golden character." His impact has already begun to move into a second notable stage, the inspiring legacy of a remarkable man. The Spanish phrase *pasó por aquí* (passed by here) encapsulates this commendable life. Frank Szasz expanded our minds while he warmed our hearts.

Notes

1. The fullest account of Frank Szasz's life and career is contained in Frank Gregorsky, "Author Profiles 2006: Dr. Ferenc Morton Szasz, Albuquerque," 22 September 2006, www.ExactingEditor.com/SzaszNewMexico.html, 29 pages. See also, Margaret Connell Szasz, et al., email message to Richard W. Etulain, 6 August 2010.
2. Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Day the Sun Rose Twice: The Story of the Trinity Site Nuclear Explosion, July 16, 1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), x.
3. Gregorsky, 12.
4. Szasz also edited *Religion in the West* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1984), *Religion in Modern New Mexico*, with Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), and *Great Mysteries of the West* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993).
5. Szasz, *The Day the Sun Rose Twice*, on back book jacket.
6. Gregorsky, 4.
7. Connell Szasz, email message to author, 6 August 2010.
8. David Van Holtby, email message to author, 27 June, 2 July 2010.
9. Szasz and Etulain, *Religion in Modern New Mexico*, and Etulain and Szasz, *The American West in 2000: Essays in Honor of Gerald D. Nash* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003).