

# Charles Forberg, Architect

August 23, 1919 – February 4, 2013

## *Pictures etched on a Nephew's Heart*

Uncle Charles of New York City was larger than life, an 11-year old boy's hero even before he came to visit his brother Walter, wife Elaine and four young nephews and nieces on a remote country farm along the Lower Columbia River near the Pacific Coast in the Grays River Valley of Washington State in 1955.

Prior to meeting him the first time, Charles mailed four postcards to me while his wife Ati and he vacationed on a Caribbean Island. Palm trees

framed a seascape of footprints fading

into the distance on a beach of white sand, foam patterns created by surf of emerald blue water, and tropical flowers were painted on the message portion of four postcards in a jigsaw pattern. Mailed separately on successive days, his artistry of the scene emerged into full view only after my receiving the fourth card. Re-living the anticipation and thrill he created in his eldest nephew for 'seeing the picture' in his art, through a camera lens and meeting him the first time are images indelibly etched on my heart. While consulting with PanAm and Boeing Aircraft in Seattle, he drove 300 miles of narrow 2-lane road for our first encounter 57 years ago.



February 5<sup>th</sup>, I received very sad news from his wife via my cousin Lynn Julian in Darien, CT: "I wanted to let you know that my dear Charles was in a freakish car accident on Sunday, February 3. He was immediately declared brain dead after his car hit a tree and he died shortly thereafter at Westchester Medical on February 4<sup>th</sup>. I will be having a celebration of his life sometime around Easter. I have asked my daughter Brenda to forward this tribute she wrote of my Charles." Elizabeth

**Today we lost a gentle and beautiful man who's love lit up Mom's face. He made her dance. We love you Charles. We will miss your peace, your wisdom, your kindness, and your never ending curiosity about life and why things matter.**





Charles was number four in a birth order of five Forberg siblings born to Carl and Viola Forberg of south Minneapolis, Minnesota from 1914 to 1920. Descending in height are Richard, Walter, Ruth, Charles and Miriam.

Carl Gustaf Forberg was born in Elvsborgs lan, Vastergotland, western Sweden in 1878. He emigrated with his parents, Johnan Gustaf and Augusta Charlotta, two brothers and three sisters to America in 1886. His mother died Christmas Eve, three years later.

Viola Amelia Atwood was born to Charles and Ruth Atwood in Newaygo, Michigan in 1885, youngest of six brothers and sisters. Charles favored his mother's physical frame,

quiet disposition and was named after Viola's brother, Charles Lewis Atwood. Early models for his artistry and photography were his father, mother and siblings ...



During a half century, memories of him are framed on my heart in pictures, some of which were captured in the lens of my camera. But, the most dramatic scene of his creative genius, a source of inspiration, for literally, a nation, was not discovered until after his death.

In 1955, New York architect Edward Barnes was hired as Pan Am's consultant designer. He and his associate Charles Forberg revamped the company's image in preparation for introducing America's first commercial jets, the Boeing 707 and Douglas DC 8. The traditional half wing symbol was replaced with a clean blue globe overlaid with curved parabolic lines to give an impression of an airline without geographic demarcations. Royal blue became the official color. On all aircraft, a royal blue line ran along the fuselage below the windows. November 1, 1972, the corporate name was changed to "Pan Am". Pan Am's famous blue ball became and still remains one of the world's most recognized corporate logos, along with Coke Cola and Kodak.





After graduation from Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon, my wife Dianne and I moved to Brussels, Belgium in January 1968. In NYC, we stayed in the penthouse bedroom of Charles Forberg & Associates located in a 6-story warehouse at 224 Centre Street in Lower Manhattan. Situated between Puerto Rican and Italian enclaves with a NYPD precinct across the street, access was a freight elevator to his loft studio.

Large, steel, double doors opened into another world. Solid wood floors; 16-ft ceilings; exposed red brick; white reflective walls; window alcoves; large flat work areas and drafting tables; wood, glass and metal shops; photography darkroom; a rope swing from the steep penthouse bedroom stairway with no railings [he thought them an eyesore] swung across the studio; an archery range and a table tennis table.

A scale model of the yet-to-be-released Boeing 747 with PanAm logos on the tail and fuselage graphics occupied the table tennis table. At the time, Charles was working on designing the circular stairwell between the main and upper decks of the 747 for Boeing Aircraft.

"How good are you at table tennis?" he asked rather casually. As I had been soundly beaten by Uncle Richard, his older brother, Senior VP of Engineering at Proctor & Gamble in Cincinnati the day before, I replied, "I'm not so sure."

"Well then, help me move this plane off the table to the floor and let's find out," he suggested. I don't recall getting more than 10 out of 21 possible points during each of 5 games. After a second trouncing, feeling a bit humiliated, Charles took Dianne and I to dinner at his home in Brooklyn Heights to meet Aunt Ati and cousins Sarina and Erika, about ages 16 and 6.

As a Christmas gift for Erika a couple of weeks earlier, Charles created a cloud room with a white, stretch-fabric he was using on a design project. With great enthusiasm, she demonstrated jumping into her clouds from a high perch and 'floating' to the floor, bouncing on descending levels of this special material. Sarina, also full of life, was overjoyed at just meeting a cousin for the first time. As Aunt Ati was born and raised in Berlin, dinner that evening was an introduction to a touch of European culture we would experience during the next 8 years. Also an artist, Ati was an illustrator of children's book, several of which we had in our own homes while growing up.





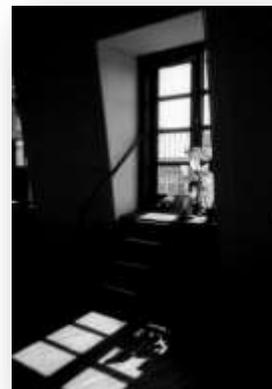
Though vaguely aware of Aunt Ati's history, I did not know the full story of her famous father until discovering *Gropius: An Illustrated Biography of the Creator of The Bauhaus* by Reginald Isaacs some years later. [photo: Walter & Ati in 1938]

Walter Gropius (1883-1969) was at the center of the architectural world for half a century: pioneer of the glass curtain wall and prefabricated housing; founder of the single most influential force on modern design, The Bauhaus School; war hero; lover of the notorious Alma Mahler; teacher of great influence.

After fleeing Nazi Germany, Gropius practiced in England, taught a generation of architects and planners as Chairman of the School of Architecture at Harvard University and executed architectural projects all over the world. The PamAm Building (now MetLife Building) in NYC, JFK Federal Building in Boston, University of Baghdad in Iraq, US Embassy in Athens, Place St. Cyrille Commercial Center in Quebec are but a few of his projects. However, Tel Aviv is the largest collection of buildings of Bauhaus architecture in the world.

The next picture in the dusty recesses of my memories was a stop-over at 224 Centre Street the summer of 1970. A scale model of the U.S. Space and Aeronautical Museum was moved off the table tennis table to the floor. As he was pre-occupied with designing an intricate exhibition for the museum, we deferred facing off until evening, enabling me to capture some views of his environment with my camera.

Later, although I'd been honing my table tennis skills in Europe, narrowing the point margins of our matches considerably, he still held the upper hand. While pounding that little white ball back and forth, we discussed a wide range of issues ... creativity, photography, philosophy, spirituality, culture and just men stuff. We seemed to share a commonality rising to a level beyond what I knew with my own father.



The restoration of my manhood at a table tennis took place during the spring of 1972. On the day I flew into NYC from Stockholm, Uncle Richard was also in town on Proctor & Gamble business from Cincinnati. Unbeknown to my uncles, I'd had been playing against rather stiff competition in Europe including a British friend of considerable reputation in the U.K. table tennis world. The scale model on the table was another museum for which Charles was the consultant architect and designer. As Richard was an engineer, Charles had several questions relative to the complexity of translating some abstract



concepts into tangible form and lighting for the museum's central exhibition. About 8:00 pm, Richard and I squared off. As I recall, he had about 15 points to my 21 before sitting down in defeat. As the winner goes on to the next round, Charles was my next challenger. Though the younger brother, he didn't even fare as well as Richard. Determined to avoid humiliation at the hand of an upstart nephew, we played until well after midnight. Neither uncle won a match. For myself, it was *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Shootout at the OK Corral* ... *The Centre Street Redemption* ... all wrapped into one.

About 2:00 am, the three of us carefully returned the scale model of his project onto the table, a project Charles referred to as the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, and turned out the lights.

Before leaving NYC for Seattle, I sought his advice regarding a proposal I was considering about becoming senior manager of a group of Christian bookshops in England. It would mean relocating from Stockholm to London. All the shops were in older brick buildings without level floors, square corners, plumb walls and space limitations. He advised building a system of modular display fixtures mounted on level, plumb, square bases around the walls, extending fixture display end panels for affixing a false ceiling structure supporting translucent panels. We agreed the best guy for the job was his brother, my father. He and my mother did accept the challenge, relocating to London with two sisters in July '72. For the next 3 years, my father and I remodeled Christian bookshops in England, Scotland and Ireland.



Charles smiled when I stopped by to ask his advice and play table tennis in July '75. My wife Dianne, three children: Bethany, Michael, Lisa; parents and sister Hope were in Williamsburg, VA with two double decker buses just shipped into Newport News from London via Rotterdam. My father and I planned to outfit them as mobile Christian bookshops to serve smaller cities of Oregon. Also, we had a proposal from Tyndale Publishing House for us to manufacture bookstore display fixtures for national distribution through their subsidiary, Unilit Distributors in Portland, Oregon.



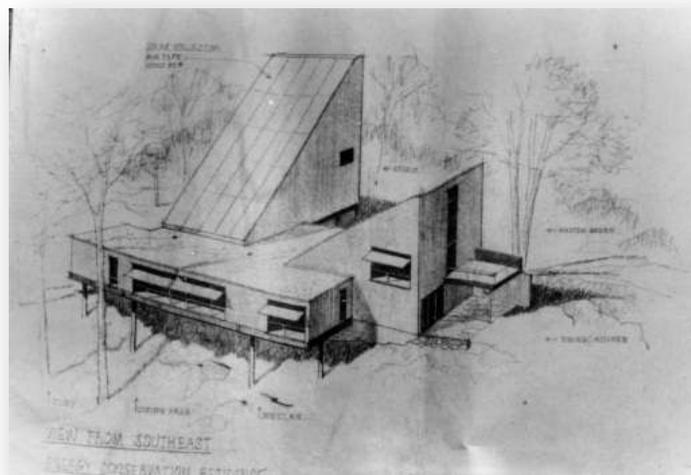
Earlier that year, I had a dream that someday, Charles would design a home for my family. In the dream, that occurred in Bromley, Kent, SE London, I had visualized the property along the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Highway in Springdale, Oregon. While on a trip to the Northwest in April, a doctor and his wife agreed to sell me 4.5 acres of their 49 acre farm, nothing down and \$125/month.

Five years later, Charles flew from NYC to Portland for site evaluation. Design requirements for a house with wheelchair access on property with a

distinct slope to the south presented several challenges. He returned to 224 Centre Street to draw up plans and create a scale model for an incredible home that was never built. I carried those plans and the detachable model of that house, with a tear-stained gray roof, in a battered cardboard box around for many years. To quote Robert Kincaid in *The Bridges of Madison County*, "The old dreams were good dreams, they didn't work out, but I'm glad I had them."



During the late 80s, Charles purchased a hilly, wooded, 3-acre lot east of Pound Ridge north of NYC near the Connecticut State Line. His architectural design was an energy conservation home/studio in the rear of the property that seemed to float over a half-moon shaped pond. Entrance to the studio from the foyer was dramatic. The roof line rose three stories at a 45-degree angle. Two balconies overlooking the primary work space on the main floor. Stairs to a photographic studio on the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, without an outside railing, and window placement has been described as "a restrained study in angles and light." A photo darkroom, a door to an observation deck was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level. A 25-foot steel pole, embedded in concrete, detached from the house to avoid motion, was a telescope mount. Solar panels were mounted on the studio roof.



Charles was general contractor. After the foundation, framing, siding and windows were completed, I signed on his crew as a finish carpenter for a couple of weeks. Except for a couple of other guys working on tile, it was really just the two of us.

At that point in our lives, he was in his early 70s, late 40s for me. A ruptured personal and business relationship with my father left me devoid of a man to interpret deeper issues in a guy's life. He had a deep understanding of creative thought processes, desire, magic, the urge to create. "Architects have a strong sex drive," he'd say, "that's why we refer to our architectural creations as erections."

The author Evelyn Waugh wrote there are only two types of people: "the static and the dynamic."

Though thoughtful, a bit reserved, and soft-spoken, Charles was certainly the latter of the two. Instead of doing battle at the table tennis, we'd slip through a gate in the fence with a couple of clubs and white balls to play on the neighbor's private, par-3 golf course. His neighbor, the founder and president of BIC PEN was a friend and had given Charles unlimited privileges.



Charles' last commission was a private residence in Rye, New York. The entry, foyer and living room are similar to his home in Pound Ridge. The entrance to the studio would be the wall space with the piece of art left of the entry. The description by Architecture For Sale on its website is a beautiful word picture of the environment, ambiance and style of his creative genius ...

"This architectural waterfront jewel is a restrained study in angles and light by architect Charles Forberg, son-in-law of Walter Gropius, founder of The Bauhaus School. A sensation of tranquility immediately

envelopes you upon entering this one acre property positioned for ultimate privacy with its wooded, natural landscape. Ascending the graceful curved drive, you are greeted with a floating structure that reflects the ambiance of an island experience, having water on two sides. A place for retreat, reprise, play, and home with architecture as art, seldom found, not often experienced."



I did not discover, however, the memorial for which Uncle Charles will be most remembered until after his death. Memories of *The Centre Street Redemption* prompted an internet search to discover whatever became of the scale model of the Diaspora Museum on the table tennis that night.

The result of my search was the website: [www.bh.org.il/](http://www.bh.org.il/)

### **Beit Hatfutsot: The Museum of the Jewish People.**

Click "Exhibitions," then "Core Exhibition" from the pull down menu and then "Memorial Column":

#### **The Memorial Column**

Suspended from the ceiling in the central area of the core exhibition, the column commemorates Jewish martyrdom throughout history and reflects the complexity of translating abstract concepts into tangible form. The Memorial Column symbolizes the theme of Jewish survival in an abstract artistic metal sculpture composed of commanding lights suspended from the ceiling in the central space of the museum, a tribute to the oppression and tragedy that befell the Jewish people over generations.

Dedicated to Jewish martyrs throughout the ages.

Designer: Charles Forberg, New York.

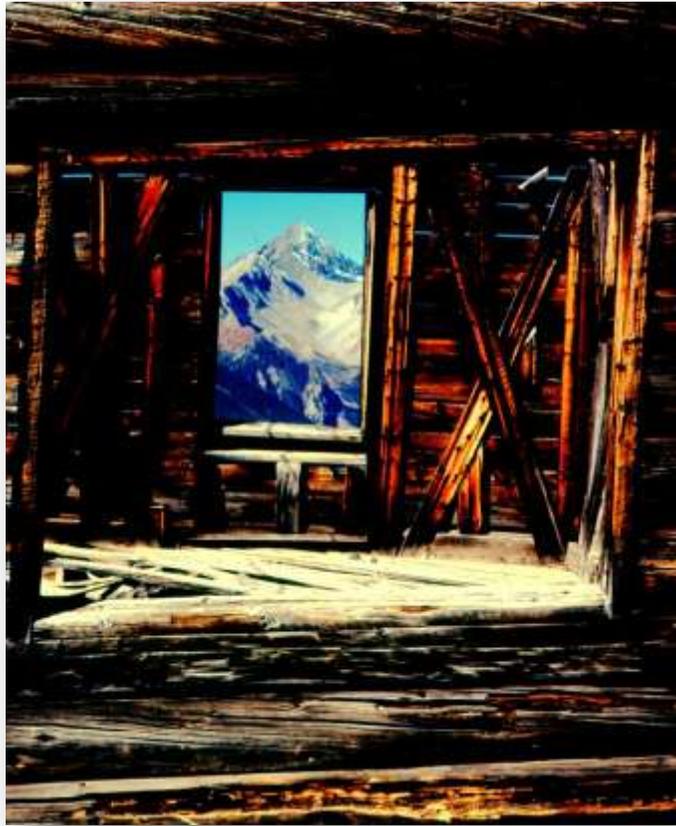


After receiving news of his death, I spoke with my cousin Erika (Forberg/Gropius) Markou in Waltham, Massachusetts by phone. "Ron," she said softly, "you were the son my father never had."

My tribute to Uncle Charles Lewis Forberg was penned centuries ago by the earliest Hebrew author ...

*But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that He will stand upon the earth at last. And I know that after this body has decayed, this body shall see G-d! Then He will be on my side! Yes, I shall see Him, not as a stranger, but as a friend! What a glorious hope!*

Job 19:25-27 (Living Bible)



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Addendum:  
Walter Gropius - Testament  
Tel Aviv - The Bauhaus Period  
Birth of the Israeli Airforce (video)

