

## Judicial Profile

ELAINE C. SIT

### Hon. Abraham Lincoln Marovitz Senior Judge, Northern District of Illinois

IT IS ARGUABLE how many outside the boxing world would have noticed a young prize-fighter in Chicago called "Herbie Miller." But no one would argue about the legendary  
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local and national treasure, U.S. District Court Senior Judge for the Northern District of Illinois Abraham Lincoln Marovitz. At age 94, he still goes regularly to his chambers in the Everett McKinley Dirksen Federal Building and still presides over naturalization ceremonies for new citizens at various venues throughout the city.

Appointed by President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Judge Marovitz assumed senior status in 1975, and continued to try cases until 1990. During his nearly 40 years on the bench, Judge Marovitz has sworn in more new citizens than any other federal judge. No less an authority than the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service recognized this achievement when it presented him with an award for his "Life-long Commitment to the Realization of Immigrants' Dreams" during a ceremony in 1993 at which he administered the oath to a mere 2,000 new citizens.

Judge Marovitz may be the only federal judge in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for administering the oath of allegiance to the largest number of new citizens at one time: 11,200 at Chicago's Soldier Field on a sweltering August day in 1996. According to the judge, "It was the hottest day they ever had. People were fainting and the guest speaker was a fellow from Tennessee with a thick stack of papers. I said to him that I hoped he wouldn't deliver the whole speech, but he said he would. While he gave his speech, more people fainted. When I got up, I thought it would be cruel and unusual punishment if I kept them any longer than I had to. So I didn't." With a laugh reflecting just a touch of satisfaction in his own wisdom, the judge leaned back and smiled. "I got many nice letters for not making a long speech." He might also have been remembering the spontaneous serenade of "Happy Birthday" that the new citizens and their guests, 25,000 in all, gave him for his 91st birthday.

Born to immigrant parents of Lithuanian descent in Oshkosh, Wis., on Aug. 10, 1905, Judge Marovitz



grew up on Chicago's Maxwell Street, the poor ethnic enclave that was also home to a pantheon of 20th century achievers such as William Paley, Benny Goodman, Admiral Hyman Rickover, Paul Muni, Meyer Levin, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg.

Judge Marovitz's parents were orthodox Jews. His "pa" was a tailor and his "ma" ran a candy store to support their family of two daughters and three sons. The often-told legend of how the judge became the most famous namesake of our 16th president bears repeating. According to Judge Marovitz,

"My mother thought Abraham Lincoln was a Jew. He had a beard, his name was Abraham, and she heard he had been shot in the temple. She made up her mind that if she ever got married and had a son, she'd name him after this great Jew who freed the slaves, Abraham Lincoln. When my brother Harold was born, my pa said 'I don't care about your President Lincoln, there's nobody named after my father.' But when I came along, my mother had her way." The judge hesitated for a moment and added wistfully, "Those were her last words, 'My Abraham Lincoln.'"

While working as a teenage "office boy" at the Chicago law firm now known as Mayer Brown & Platt, Judge Marovitz earned extra money as an amateur boxer. Out of respect to his father's constant admonition to "never hurt the name," the judge

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fought as "Herbie Miller" in neighborhood matches. Speed and accuracy were his forte: "I don't want to be immodest," he said, "but I was a pretty good boxer. There were a lot of amateur fights in those days. If you had a little bit of a following, you could box pretty regularly, and I had a following. Sometimes, if you put on a nice show, a guy would give you a five dollar bill." One morning, after a particularly brutal "show," the judge reported to his day job displaying the obvious ill effects of the fight the night before. The judge's boss was chagrined at the

swollen eye and cut lip and immediately told his office boy to enroll at the Kent College of Law, gave him a check for \$120 to cover tuition, and a weekly raise from \$8 to \$10 so that he could pay back the loan at the rate of \$2 per week. When he graduated from law school at the age of 19 (a college degree was not a prerequisite for law school at the time), Judge Marovitz had to wait two years before he could sit for the Illinois bar exam. He passed, and became a lawyer at 21. Soon thereafter he became the youngest assistant state's attorney in Cook County.

Following his stint as assistant state's attorney, Judge Marovitz went into private practice with his older brother Harold. When his younger brother Sydney became a lawyer the firm became Marovitz, Marovitz, and Marovitz. The memories of the family that was such a powerful influence on his life seem to wash over him: "We were not only sisters and brothers, we were also best friends." The Judge

added, "Now I'm the only one left."

In 1938, Judge Marovitz became the first Jewish state senator in Illinois history and the first Illinois legislator to sponsor an Equal Housing and Fair Employment Act. Even though the act did not pass, he secured the lifelong loyalty of another young senator, one of seven (including the judge himself) who voted in support of the legislation, mayor-to-be Richard J. Daley. World War II broke out during Judge Marovitz's term as a state legislator. Instead of relying on his senatorial deferment, the judge tried to enlist, repeatedly. Initially he discovered that he could not enter the service as an officer (the rank to which he was entitled) and maintain his seat in the Senate at the same time. Then, he was turned down for failing the physical because he was colorblind. The judge persevered. Eventually, he found a cooperative physician, who coincidentally had also grown up near Maxwell Street, and found that the judge's eyesight had improved enough for him to be accepted into the Marines. He waived his deferment, and at the age of 38, joined the Marine Corps as a private. Of his war years, Judge Marovitz said simply, "I served in the Philippines and got a shrapnel wound in the arm, but turned down the Purple Heart. I went back to the Senate after the war was over; they were nice enough to hold my spot." He was discharged with the rank of sergeant major, the highest attainable for an enlisted Marine.

In 1950, Judge Marovitz was elected judge of the Superior Court of Illinois. Later, he served in the Chancery Division; however, his work as chief justice of the Cook County Criminal Court is where he put his heart because of his special affinity for cases involving juvenile offenders. "In criminal court all the cases were challenging. I was in strong favor of probation," the judge declared. "I was criticized many times by the crime commission for being too lenient. But a lot of kids' lives were at stake and I helped them get jobs. Every once in a while a man will come in with his kid and he'll say, 'Do you remember me, judge?' I'll say, 'I really don't, but you tell me why you remember me.' And he'll say, 'You put me on probation and gave me a chance to straighten out my life. I wanted my son to meet you.'"

In fact, the judge has touched so many lives that it is nearly impossible for him to walk more than a few steps along any downtown street without being stopped and greeted by well-wishers. When the judge celebrated his 90th birthday, he invited nearly 2,000 guests to the party. Three nights before the gala he was worrying about whether he had left anybody out. The judge was on the phone near midnight with personal invitations to people who might seem ordinary to others, but not to him." A guest who received one of the judge's late night

calls was a young Vietnamese student whom he had sworn in as a U.S. citizen and befriended. The other guests ranged from Bob Hope, who sang "Thanks for the Memories" to federal judges Ann. C. Williams and Ilana Rovner, who also serenaded Judge Marovitz as the "Circuit-Breakers." The young and old, the rich and famous, and a lot of ordinary folk have all been touched by the judge's generosity. "It sounds very corny" he admits, "but the day is lost for me if I can't think of some little mitzvah, some good deed, I did for somebody else to make their lives a little happier."

Judge Marovitz attributes his penchant for helping others to the values instilled by his beloved "ma" and "pa," whose portraits dominate the walls of his chambers. "It's always phenomenal," he said, "how much we can learn from uneducated parents. Every day as we were leaving for school, my mother would kiss us all and say 'Don't forget to do your mitzvah today — your good deeds.' Occasionally we would fib because we didn't do anything and she could tell as soon as we opened our mouths. But she would laugh," he recalled. "And my pa was a very honest man. If he found a few bucks in a man's pockets, he'd return it. He always taught us the importance of having a good name." The judge's devotion to them remains to this day: miniature versions of the portraits embellish a pair of cuff links that he wears regularly, "I keep them close and I'm never without them. If I don't have cuffed shirts, then they're in my pocket."

The judge's plainspoken humanity, good humor, and courage have endeared him to everyone lucky enough to meet him. In fact, published tributes to the judge have consisted of page after page of letters literally adorned with valentines from no less than five former presidents of the Chicago Bar Association and a who's who of the Northern District of Illinois including Chief Judge Marvin Aspen. The special relationship between the judge and Chica-

go's Daley clan was memorialized by the current Mayor Daley's tribute letter addressed "Dear Judge 'Uncle Abe' Marovitz."

Even a partial list of the honors conferred upon Judge Marovitz is an embarrassment of riches for the man, who unpretentiously says, "I think I enjoyed a good reputation as a lawyer, but I've had a lot of help. At my age, I have yet to meet a self-made man or a self-made woman. I've had help all my life. I'm never unmindful of how I got where I am and who helped me get there." When asked to give his best piece of advice for young lawyers, the judge did not miss a beat, "There's never an excuse for lack of courtesy. You might disagree with your opponent, but reach out. Make someone a little happier for crossing your path. My ma always used to say that everybody can't do big things but everybody can do a lot of little things to help others."

Luckily for us, Herbie Miller's opponent clobbered him in that prizefight so long ago. Judge Marovitz declared that he had no regrets about giving up boxing, even though he participated in the original Golden Glove tournament of 1923. In fact, the sport that lost Judge Marovitz to the legal profession recently paid its own tribute to the scrappy fighter from Maxwell Street when it made him the first inductee to the Golden Gloves Hall of Fame. Borrowing a theme from another longtime friend, Frank Sinatra, Judge Marovitz has spent almost a century living "his way." "Many times people say they wished they did this or that," he said. "Immodestly, I say, 'I did it!' and I have no regrets." TFL

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