

Courage¹

by Phillip W. Weiss

Marcus Davidson was born in 1917 in New York City. He was the only child of Ruben and Yetta Davidson, a Jewish couple who had immigrated to the United States ten years earlier and settled in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. At that time the Lower East Side was the single largest enclave of Jews in the world. Shortly after arriving, Ruben opened a candy store. He and Yetta manned the store. While it was not exactly a gold mine, the store did enough business to allow Ruben and Yetta to rent a five room flat in a nearby tenement. That was where Marcus was born. Although Jewish, neither Ruben nor Yetta were especially observant and desiring to be American and become part of American society, they quickly traded Yiddish, their native tongue, for English and made sure to enroll Marcus in the public schools where English was spoken. Thus, Marcus never learned Yiddish and outside of being bar mitzvahed, Marcus gave little thought or concern about his Jewish background. He was an American through and through, as American as apple pie and a product of a process of assimilation that transformed the newcomers into mainstream Americans. Everything was going well for the Davidsons. The candy store was a modest success, Marcus was attending school and doing well in his studies (in fact, he was planning to go to college to become a schoolteacher), and the effects of the

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¹ This story is based on characters featured on the 1947 movie *Body and Soul*.

Depression seemed to pass them by. Then in 1934 tragedy struck. When Marcus was seventeen years old, Ruben suffered a massive heart attack and the next day died. Yetta and Marcus were devastated not only emotionally but financially. Ruben's death was a massive financial blow. Ruben had managed the store and with him now gone, that responsibility fell to Yetta and she simply was too devastated and stricken by grief to take over. Soon, the bills started piling up, business dropped off, rent could not be paid, and the store closed, leaving Yetta and Marcus destitute. While growing up, Marcus discovered that he had a certain gift for sports. He was an excellent athlete. He excelled at baseball, football and basketball. But Marcus's favorite sport was boxing, a sport that attracted his attention for two reasons, first, unlike the other sports, boxing involved one against one competition, which Marcus especially liked, and second, it was a sport in which, if you were good at it, you could make money. While Yetta was glad that Marcus took an interest in sports, she was opposed to him becoming a boxer or having anything to do with boxing. The idea of her son being beat up in a ring drove her to the brink of a nervous breakdown. So, Marcus, who loved and respected his mother, didn't seriously pursue boxing as a possible career choice. Instead, he was looking forward to going to college and then getting a good civil service job as a public-school teacher, the kind of job that would provide, most importantly, job security, and would enable him to support his mother who besides working in the store, never was employed and at her age could not find a job that paid enough to pay the bills. One day, Marcus returned home from

school. He found Yetta speaking with a woman. The woman introduced herself as Miss Landsman from the New York City Department of Relief. She explained that the purpose of her visit was to do a home study which was a standard procedure for all applications for home relief. When Marcus heard the words home relief, he became enraged. He told Miss Landsman that they did not need welfare and to pack her case and get out. Yetta was shocked. After Miss Landsman was gone, Marcus went downstairs, where there was a payphone in the hallway, called Clancy's Gym where he would go after school to practice his boxing skills, and spoke with Joe Clancy. He told Clancy, "Set me up for matches. I need money and need it fast, and don't tell me no!" The next day, Marcus dropped out of school and started his new career as a professional prize fighter. Under Clancy's tutelage, Marcus quickly developed into one of the best boxers in the middleweight division. His first professional fight was a six round preliminary bout at Sunnyside Gardens. Marcus won that fight with a technical knockout in the fourth round. He was paid fifty dollars, which he gave to his mother. That fight was the first of a long string of victories, all by knockout. Marcus never ducked a fight. He was determined to win and even more determined to make enough money to prevent a repeat of the indignity to which his mother was forced to endure when she had to apply for relief. "Relief is for losers," Marcus told his girlfriend, Mona Friedman, who he met in high school and was in love with Marcus. "Money opens the door to success. With money you're a somebody, without money, you're a nobody and I don't want to be a nobody," Marcus said.

Mona told Marcus that he wasn't a nobody, that she loved him and would do anything for him. Every time Mona said that, Marcus would smile, give her a kiss and tell her that she was sweet kid. By the following year, Marcus was already attracting the attention of those devious and shady characters who give boxing a bad name, that is, the gangsters, slicksters, racketeers and loan sharks who prey on boxers, offering false promises of big pay says and good times, in return for their victim's souls. Under Clancy's supervision, Marcus was making good money. He had yet to be featured as a main event, but Clancy urged him to be patient and that soon his time would come. But the last thing Marcus had in good supply was patience. He already had the taste of money and wanted more. The more he boxed, the more money he made, more so because he kept winning. The problem was that he had yet to get a match with a contender and Clancy simply did not have the pull to arrange such a match and Marcus was getting tired of waiting. Then one day Albert Kramer showed up at Clancy's gym to speak with Marcus. Kramer was a big-time operator connected with Feldstein Associates, which was a front for a major protection racket that specialized in extortion, book making, bootlegging, and prostitution. Kramer told Marcus that he had a future in boxing and that he could get him all the matches he wanted including a shot at the title. Clancy knew Kramer and warned Marcus that if he signed with Kramer, he would be asking for big trouble. But Marcus, intent on making money and hearing that he could get a shot at the title, didn't listen to Clancy and left Clancy's gym and joined Kramer's organization. At first, Kramer seemed as good

as his words. Marcus fought and defeated a slew of mugs, pugs, lugs and slugs in every part of the country. Sometimes he wondered if some of these guys were taking dives, but his concerns always evaporated when he received his share of the gate. Soon, he was making enough money to buy his mother gold jewelry, pay the rent for her apartment, buy himself a DeSoto automobile and frequent the fanciest restaurants in town, sometimes with Mona and sometimes with other girls sent by Kramer to keep Marcus happy. One of those girls was named Cindy. She knew how to please a man, especially young men who had a lot to learn about life and women. Cindy knew a good thing when she saw it and in Marcus she knew she had hit pay dirt. Within a year, Marcus became known throughout the boxing world. Sports prognosticators predicted that it was only a matter of time before Marcus would get a shot at the title. That shot soon came and before knew it, Marcus was set to fight the champion, Ken Kentulve, for the middleweight title of the world. The fight was set to take place in Chicago at Wrigley Field that could hold the fifty thousand fans who were expected to show up for the event. Although undefeated in all his fights, Marcus was the heavy underdog. Kramer assured Marcus that he was a lock to win and to ignore the bettors who were just a bunch of greedy jerks. Believing that the fight was legitimate, Marcus trained hard, and by fight night was ready to fight and win. And win he did, by a technical knockout in the fourth round, shocking the boxing world and the bettors who were taken to the cleaners. Even Marcus was surprised by how easily he won. In fact, if the referee had not stopped the fight, Marcus

might have killed him. It was almost as if the champ was going through the motions, not really wanted to fight. But Marcus gave that no second thought. He was now middleweight champion of the world. He wished his mother had been at the arena to see him win. "Nothing could be better than this," Marcus thought. The possibility that the fight was fixed never crossed Marcus's mind. Soon, talk began over scheduling Marcus's first title defense. Would it be a rematch with the now deposed ex-champ or with an up and comer itching for a shot at the title that Marcus had coveted for so long and now was his. Kramer told Marcus to relax, that everything was under control and that all he had to do was keep himself in shape and follow his instructions. Cindy also came by to soothe Marcus in ways that she knew Marcus craved. Soon flushed with victory, eating at the best restaurants, spending money like a drunkard on a buying spree, Marcus stopped watching his weight, staying in shape and became soft and complacent. But time didn't stop nor did the plans for a title defense. Soon Kramer arranged for the match to take place at Yankee Stadium that could hold the tens of thousands of fans that were expected to attend. Marcus had just a few weeks to get into shape, Yet the early odds were heavily in his favor to win against an opponent who had already vowed to demolish the champ and send him to an early grave. Marcus never heard that kind of talk before a fight. He was used to hearing rough language, but no opponent said he was out to kill him. This caused Marcus some concern and soon it became an obsession. He wondered if he was being set up to die. He thought Krasmer had his best interests at heart. No way could the guy

who gave him a shot at the title now sacrifice him to make a few extra bucks. Maybe he should have listened to Clancy, Marcus thought. But if he had, then he wouldn't be champion today. Then one evening he received a phone call from Kekulve. Kekulve told Marcus to beware and hung up. The next day he met with Kramer. This time Kramer wasn't smiling. He was all business. He told Marcus that boxing was a racket and that the fix was in, and that he should bet all his money he has on himself to lose. How he threw the fight was Marcus's business. His opponent was in on the fix and had been told to take it easy on Marcus just as long as Marcus cooperated and took a dive. Then Kramer told Marcus to get out and don't even think about double crossing him because if he did, he wouldn't live to enjoy it. After he left Kramer's office, Marcus decided to head home. He needed a place to think and work things out. So, he headed back to his home, the old neighborhood in the Lower East Side. When Marcus arrived in front of the building where his mother lived and he was born, word quickly spread that Marcus was back. Soon, throngs of kids surrounded Marcus's car, and the crowd became so big that the police had to be called to restore order and allow Marcus to leave his car and go see his mother. Marcus was home. He was back in the place where he had grown up, played and learned to box. Marcus was one of them. He was their hero, the boy who had done good and who could do no wrong. When Marcus arrived at the door to his mother's apartment, he knocked on the door. Through the door, he heard his mother say, "Come in, Marcus, the door is open." Marcus opened the door and went to the kitchen. His mother was seated

at the table. She was not alone. Mona was seated at the table too. "Hello, Marcus," Mona said. "Hi, Mona, it's good to see you again," Marcus said and sat down. "It looks like you've attracted quite a crowd," Yetta said. "Yes, I guess I have," Marcus said. "I'm surprised you're here. Aren't you supposed to be fighting tomorrow?" Yetta asked. Marcus replied, "That's right. The fight is on for tomorrow," "You must be excited," Mona said. "Yeah, I'm excited. There's a lot on the line," Marcus said. "I saw a photo of you in the papers with a girl," Mona said. "That was a publicity shot, set up by my manager, you know, just a way to promote the fight," Marcus said. "Does she mean anything to you?" Mona persisted. "No, she doesn't. She's just a girl who I had dinner with. That's it." Marcus said, starting to feel like coming home was a big mistake. "Marcus, I know you," Yetta said. "You wouldn't be here unless something was bothering you. So, what's bothering you?" Marcus recounted his meeting with Kramer and concluded by saying, "and so it's like this: if I throw the fight, I'll make a ton of money but I'll be a bum and Kramer's stooge, and if I decide not to throw the fight and win, I could get myself killed." "Well, my son," Yetta said, "you're running with a rough crowd. So, what are you going to do?" "I really don't know," Marcus said. "I thought by coming here I could work things out." "Of course, you're welcomed to stay, Marcus. I have already made your bed. And if you want, I can make us dinner." "That's okay, Mom." Marcus then got up and kissed his mother and then took Mona in his arms and told her, "I'm sorry for everything," Then Marcus left. In the street the crowd roared with joy and excitement when Marcus

emerged from the building. In the neighborhood, Marcus was not just a name in the newspapers and radio. He was a symbol of the neighborhood. Marcus knew this and the burden of this responsibility wore on him like a heavy weight. He had some serious thinking to do and no one with whom to take counsel except with himself. "Whatever I do will reflect in the neighborhood, on Mona and most of all on his mother," Marcus thought. He had a lot to think about. It would be a long night, he thought. Marcus smiled, waived at the crowd, got into his car, and drove away. Tomorrow was just around the corner. Marcus was in a bind. He had no one to depend on except himself. He wanted the money, but he needed respect. He wanted notoriety but for all the right reasons. He wasn't a bum, or was he? Soon that question will be answered. He returned to his hotel, went to his room, and flopped on his bed, alone with his thoughts, that is, if he could still think clearly. Other people were doing the thinking for him. He didn't like it but so what? "It's my life that's on the line. So be it", he thought to himself, as he quickly fell asleep and dreamed the dream of those whose mind was already set. The next day the fight took place. Yankee Stadium was packed to the rafters. Marcus was expected to win. Those rooting for Marcus did not know that Marcus had bet on himself to lose along with everyone else who was part of the fix. As Kraner said, the fix was in. In the locker room before the fight, Marcus told his cornerman to leave him alone. Alone, Marcus's brain went blank. He had nothing more to think about. All the preliminary bouts were finished; it was time for the main event. Marcus entered the ring to the accompaniment of the roar of the

crowd. Loudest were the people from the Lower East Side. Marcus barely heard them. His opponent was already in the ring and looked like he was in great shape, which was more than he could say for himself who barely trained. But he had no need to train. He already knew what he had to do. Kramer had given him his instructions, and he did not want to die. As the crowd quieted down, the referee signaled the boxers to the center of the ring. The referee went over the rules, wished them a clean fight, then the boxers touched gloves and returned to their respective corners. Then the bell rang signaling the start of round one. Marcus met his opponent in the center of the ring, threw a couple of jabs with his left and followed with a terrific right hook that struck his opponent squarely on the jaw, knocking him out cold. The fight lasted thirty seconds. Marcus barely broke a sweat. The eighty thousand people at Yankee Stadium let out a roar that some said was the loudest sound ever produced by humans in history. Mona was at ringside. She too was cheering for her hero and her man. Nearby was Cindy who quickly disappeared into the crowd. Kramer was livid with rage. He charged the ring wanting to attack Marcus but was restrained by the police who had formed a cordon around the ring. "You're not going to get away with this," Kramer screamed. Marcus looked at Kramer, laughed and told the police, "Throw that bum out of here. He's no longer my manager. From now on I manage myself." Then a reporter rushed into the ring and asked Marcus how he felt. "I feel great," Marcus exclaimed. "As light as a feather." Yetta heard Marcus's comments over the radio and smiled. She had raised a good boy.

