Are aces wild?

WAS SOMETHING SPECIAL about San Francisco lost when legendary Judge Jack K. Berman died last week at 80? Geoff Brown, the PUC Commissioner, remembers Jack as a man "with a style and demeanor right out of the movies of the '40s. He was like Edmond O'Brien or Humphrey Bogart: a man not afraid to be a character, glad to be thought of as a friend of the long shot..." That was a San Francisco style. And like many old timers, Berman seemed to be a man of quirks.

A prodigy who graduated from Berkeley at 16, he was a lawyer at 20, but served in the war as a lowly ensign. After the war, he worked for the War Tribunals, defending Japanese officers! ... Then he worked as an Assistant DA under Pat Brown ... And then as a clever defense lawyer. In 1982, he became a surprisingly hard-sentencing judge. He had perhaps the highest IQ of any judge ever to serve on the San Francisco bench, yet he seemed to try to hide it ...

He went to Mississippi to march nonviolently for Civil Rights in 1963. But he loved the fights. And Las Vegas -- so much so that Bellagio in Vegas sent flowers after he died. Not nearly enough flowers. ...

Last week, when Jack Berman died, Willie Brown was en route to Prague on one those crystal-and-silk, state dinner-and-satiny-dining companion trade excursions the mayor loves so much. Diplomats were stunned when Brown suddenly headed back to San Francisco. Had there been an earthquake, riots? The diploms were incredulous when they heard: The mayor of San Francisco was returning home to bury an 80-year-old man ... Now that's a story.

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Nurses from the trauma unit at SFGH, where Jack was taken after he fell, came by. Jack’s assistant, Larissa Dotson and her twin Narissa, lovely, laughing and welcome were there. Bob Varni from the Calamari Club. Retired Judge Bob Dossee. Former Sheriff Dick Hongisto. Eleanor Johns. Judge John Dearborn ...

Waldo Carter played Jack’s tune, “Luck, Be a Lady Tonight.” Everybody had at least five stories of their own to tell about Jack. As David Appelbaum of David’s Deli on Geary, where Jack had lunch every Saturday for 49 years, said, “A serious man, he was always fun, real fun.”

I caught a few hints as to why he was oh-so San Franciscan. In the yarns that were told, not one had Jack out of doors. This was a man of the arenas, the saloons, the casinos and the courts. When he played tennis, he even played that indoors. No one can recall Jack being outdoors, except to take his daughter Katherine faithfully to Cal games.

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Not for him the vineyards of the country gentleman. He did not wish to be alone on a peak in Marin. His nature was conversation, his comfort was the society of people he met regularly plying a circuit from David’s to Moose’s to the Tennis Club, and in the old days to Cookie’s by the old Hall of Justice near Portsmouth Sq. If there aren’t characters like Judge Berman around as much these days, it’s because it’s not an interior city any more. It’s an outdoorsy town. In restaurants today, food is inexplicably more important than conversation...

Jack’s San Francisco was a seemingly wetter, foggier town where people escaped from the elements into night life, conviviality, and colloquy. San Franciscans traded quips, and loved to argue, carry on four conversations at once and damn the avocado with maple drizzle. They liked their lives outrageous, not their food. What lawyer today would, in lieu of a fee, confiscate his card room-owning client’s poker chips? What lawyer alone in his skyscraper would concoct a scheme by which you’d bail out demonstrators? You need to be sitting around having a beer with a bail bondsman for that. And who today would take such delight of battle?

In the ’60s, Jack Berman sat down every week to play poker in a Western Addition flat with John Dearborn, Phil Ryan and Willie Brown. He was mentoring in an older, more western, masculine mode that would not dare use the word “mentor.” But Jack was teaching, nonetheless. So when the diplomats wondered whom it was that the mayor of San Francisco was returning to honor last week, someone should have said, “He was the mensch who taught a hot-headed young lawyer to wear a poker face.”

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