

5 B63

In 1933, I was five years old. My father had died in 1931, and my mother was finally able to come to grips with the fact that we should move from our four-room Beck Street apartment in the Bronx, to a smaller apartment that would cost less. She found a two-room apartment a few blocks away on Fox Street in a new building which had an elevator. No other apartment house in the neighborhood had an elevator. And where most of the buildings were of red brick and constructed at the turn of the century, 777-783 Fox Street was of white brick and built in 1927. It was a building with two wings around a landscaped courtyard, the classiest apartment house in the neighborhood.

It was the depression, and the landlord, Mr. Gordon, who lived in the building, was confronted with a large number of empty apartments. Landlords throughout the area had signs on their buildings "Apartment for Rent" and it was well known that if you rented, you would get the first month free and the apartment would be newly painted to your specifications. It was not uncommon for a family to move into a new apartment, pay rent for a few months, and after being dunned for the rent for months, get dispossessed. Meanwhile, they lived rent-free for several months.

The rent for our apartment, B63, was supposed to be \$30 a month, but my mother persuaded Mr. Gordon to agree to \$25. We were on the top floor facing the courtyard. It had a southern exposure which meant our rooms were sun-filled and comparatively quiet. There were seven apartments to a floor, ranging from two to six rooms. The "3" line was the only one with two rooms. The rooms were relatively large, but we never spoke about square feet. My guess is that the kitchen-living-room was about 15 by 17 feet, and the bedroom slightly smaller. Between the two rooms were a hallway, a closet and a bathroom.

When we moved, my mother had to "downsize," another term that was unknown to us. She sold some of the furniture to second hand dealers, but my mother kept some beautiful pieces that she had acquired during the prosperous '20s: a mahogany bedroom suite, a mahogany china closet, a hand-made inlaid writing desk, a marble-topped table, a cut-glass lamp, a marble bust, a large wind-up record player and a record cabinet, and an imposing bookcase filled with Yiddish books including a 12 volume Yiddish encyclopedia "Veltgeshichte" in blue leather binding and gold trim, published by the Hebrew Publishing Company in 1918, which I still have.

The room that was the kitchen-dining room, also served as the living room and my bedroom. As a small child, I slept on a day bed, until it had seen better days, and when I was a teen-ager, we bought a convertible sofa bed. On the far wall there was an enclosure which originally accommodated the stove, the sink, the refrigerator and the dumb-waiter. There was also a rod on which you could hang a curtain to conceal the kitchen, but we never put up a curtain. After several years, the original refrigerator (which was usually referred to as a Frigidaire or ice box) expired, and its replacement did not fit into the old space. And after several years, the janitor (who was referred to as the

super) stopped collecting the trash by way of the dumb-waiter, and it was supposed to have been nailed shut.

In 1936, my mother bought our first radio to listen to President Roosevelt, and it was given a place of honor on the marble table. Woody Allen accurately captured the role of the radio in the homes of New Yorkers during the '30s and '40's in his film "Radio Days." It was more than a source of information and entertainment: it was our link to a world we might otherwise not know about. My mother became "hooked" on Gabriel Heatter, a newscaster who came on at 9 PM every evening on WOR, and whose signature line was "There's good news tonight." Unfortunately, his 15 minute newscast conflicted with "The Lone Ranger," a 30 minute program which came on at the same time on WJZ, so when the news ended, I switched over to the last 15 minutes of the Lone Ranger, and tried to reconstruct in my mind what happened during the first 15 minutes. After school until supper-time, I was glued to the radio, listening to Billie and Bettie, Jack Armstrong, The All-American Boy, Little Orphan Annie etc. And on Sunday evenings, The Quiz Kids, One Man's Family, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and Fred Allen. Other unforgettable programs include those on Sunday mornings beginning at 11 AM with the Forward Hour on WEVD, the news in Yiddish at 12 noon with Milchum Shtutskof, and then at 12:30 PM we switch to WAAF for the Jewish Theological Seminary's The Eternal Light.

Back to the apartment which was dominated by the "china closet". I assume it is called a china closet because it is where you put the good china. However, my mother had a lot more than china there. It was quite imposing: more than six feet tall of dark mahogany with glass doors and heavy glass shelves. It contained most of my mother's collection of cut glass—bowls, vases, plates and drinking glasses. In addition, there were painted plates from Limoges, a Japanese tea set, another collection of my mother's: small tea spoons from all over the world, and a large silver tray with foreign coins. There was also a silver tea pot, a brass antique coffee grinder and a silver incense holder, used for Havdalah.

One of my earliest memories of the apartment was the activity in the courtyard. Our windows faced the yard, and every weekend, and occasionally during the week as well, musicians would serenade the tenants. Singers, violinists, and accordion players would go from house to house giving mini-concerts, not unlike the buskers in the subways and on downtown streets today. One of the songs I still associate with the singers is "You Are My Sunshine." When they appeared, my mother would wrap up a few cents in a piece of newspaper and would give it to me to throw out of the window to the musicians. They would acknowledge it with a wave and a smile, and I would wave back. There were also peddlers who appeared in the courtyard calling out: "I cash clothes" or "I buy Singer sewing machines and old typewriters." I don't remember anyone ever calling back to them offering to cash their clothes or sell them a sewing machine or a typewriter.

Our apartment was on the sixth floor which gave us easy access to the roof. In the summer, tenants would go on the roof, spread a blanket and lie in the sun and even picnic. My mother and I would walk up the one flight to the roof, my mother with a chair

and her newspaper, and I with a ball, a spaldeen, and a piece of chalk. The elevator shaft shed was near our apartment. I chalked the outline of a strike zone on the wall of the shed, walked to an imaginary pitcher's mound and threw my spaldeen at the target. I got to be pretty good, but more important, I didn't bother the neighbors because the ball bounced over our ceiling. Occasionally, I persuaded my mother to play "hit the penny" with me. Using the same play area, I put a penny on the ground halfway between two marked lines and we would stand behind the line and try to hit the penny with the ball, bouncing it to the other person. If you hit the penny, you got a point, and if you turned over the penny, you got five points. The first to get 25 points won.

My mother seemed content in our apartment. We had the same beautiful Limoges china dishes that she had bought in the '20's. She made lovely curtains for the windows, and took pride in our expensive furnishings despite the fact that it was the depression and we were on relief. Only the neighbor across the hall in B66 was aware that we were receiving welfare, because she was as well. Mrs. Durst was American born, a widow with a son several years older than me. She had a gentleman friend who visited frequently and who loved to fish. After his visits, she would give my mother some of the fish that he brought her, mostly flounder. Mrs. Durst always knew when the welfare office was giving surplus food or clothing to recipients. She would tell my mother and we would go to the office and get whatever was being distributed: flour, sugar, butter, and dry skim milk. No matter how carefully we mixed the water with the dried milk, it always came out lumpy, and I hated it. I have a friend who uses powdered milk today, and I still can't stand it.

By the time I was 9 or 10, my mother entrusted me with some of the food shopping. She would send me to the grocery store for milk, bread, butter, eggs, cheese. The bread was either Dugan's whole wheat bread or a rye bread which was put in the window from the commission bakery. Occasionally, she would give me a pitcher and tell me to get a measure sour cream, which Mr. Rosenbaum, the grocer, would ladle out of a large metal can. I also went to the fruit and vegetable store with specific instructions, which might include "soupngreens with a petrushke." Fridays, we would buy a challah, not braided but oval. My mother would light candles Friday night, put a white table cloth on the kitchen table, and would make chicken soup, and our apartment would be "Shabasdik."

There were only three other families in our building with sons close to my age: The Tannenbaums who lived on my floor; their son Danny was a few years older than me, and our only contact was when he suggested we get a shoe shine box together; my mother vetoed the idea. The Handwergers on the fourth floor, and the Bernsteins on the fifth. Edmund Handwerker was a couple years older than me, and Harold, a couple years younger. As we got older, I spent more time with Eddie. Their parents owned the dry cleaning store on the corner of Longwood Ave. and Beck St. Marvin Bernstein was my age, and he had an older brother, Arnold. Marvin's parents were American born and his father seemed very important. He wore a suit, and may have had a clerical job downtown. I don't believe he ever acknowledged my existence. Mr. and Mrs. Handwerker were always very friendly, and they worked in the store from morning to night. I hung out with Marvin, and we were joined by two other friends from the building next door: Larry

Wilson and Miltie Greenspan. There were a couple more kids across the street: Dominic (Danny) Lala, Davie Goldman and Stanley Haft. This was my pre-teen world, in addition to the kids I knew from public school and Hebrew school.

When the U.S. entered World War II, my mother resumed work as a finisher in a garment shop in the Bronx—Zweig and Sternheim's at 1301 Beach Avenue. We were no longer on relief, and my mother was once again a member in good standing in Local 9 of the ILGWU. I have memories of visiting my mother at the shop when there was no school, sitting in a corner, reading or playing with the empty spools of thread, and watching the cutters spreading out the cloth on the long tables, the pressers operating the big Hoffman pressing machines, the sewing machine operators bent over their machines. And my mother sitting with the other finishers doing the hand sewing next to a pile of garments. Though the pay may have been less, my mother preferred working in the Bronx. It was easier to get to work; she was riding against the rush hour traffic, and it was a smaller shop.

During the '30s, tenants had their apartments painted annually. The "paintner" was employed by the landlord, and, like painting the George Washington bridge, it seemed as if he would start at one end of the apartment house and work his way to the other, and when he finished all the apartments he would start again. For many, having the apartment painted was a great disruption, and I remember people saying that they would rather move, and many families did. While still living in one apartment, they found another apartment, had it painted, and then moved in.

The man I most admired in the building was the janitor, or superintendent, or super. His name was Jack, he lived in an apartment in the basement, and I believed he could fix anything that needed fixing. He was big and strong, had been a seaman, and it seemed as if he was always working: cleaning, repairing, hosing down the courtyard and sidewalk in the summer, and shoveling snow in the winter. During the winter, the coal truck would come to the house with a load of coal, and Jack would oversee the delivery. The truck driver would back up to the window opening to the coal bin, maneuver a coal chute from the back of the truck to the open window, raise the front of the truck behind the cab, and the coal would come pouring out. Jack then had to shovel the coal from the coal pile into the furnace. There were tenants who constantly complained that their apartments were cold, and the way they complained was to bang on the radiators. The noise would reverberate throughout the house. It was their way of telling Jack to provide more heat. I am not sure when Jack left, some time during World War II, but Mr. Gordon never found another super like him. And some time after the war, Mr. Gordon sold the building to someone who did not live in it.

During World War II our apartment rent remained \$25 a month, as a result of rent control, though there was a reduction in services; the apartment was painted every two years, then every three years. The hallways and courtyard were neglected and it took longer to get needed repairs. The city realized that rent control was causing a hardship for many landlords and a 15% increase was granted. The rent for apartment B63 went to \$28.75 a month.

By the late '40s, I spent less time in the apartment, since I was going to college, working, and being with my friends. Zweig and Sternheim had closed, and my mother was working downtown which meant that she had to deal with the rush hour subway every day. Pushing into the crowded subway car and walking from the downtown subway station was a hardship for her. She persevered, and reconciled herself to the daily routine of going to work, working as a finisher, returning from work, making dinner, reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, and going to bed.

In the fall of 1950, as part of the ILGWU Training Institute, I worked as an organizer in Pennsylvania, and in February 1951, I was assigned to Cleveland. On March 12, 1951, I received a call at the Cleveland office telling me that my mother had died. The day before, a neighbor had learned that she was not well, had called for an ambulance and my mother was taken to Lincoln Hospital where she died the next day. She was 62 years old.

I returned home to our apartment, called my cousin Louis Goldstein who helped me make arrangements for the funeral, and was in a state of shock and disbelief for the next couple weeks. I was alone in our apartment. Everywhere I looked, there was my mother. I kept having a dream that I was walking down the street and in front of me was my mother, and I felt relieved because the idea that my mother had died was a mistake, a bad dream. But I would then wake up to the realization that my mother was gone. She died in pain and alone. I was not with her. I was not able to say good bye, or to comfort her.

After a few months, the pain and heartache subsided, and I was caught up in a complex of issues which had to be dealt with: I was completing the union training program, facing the draft, and getting involved with Sylvia. The union wanted me to go into the army and join them when I was discharged. I resolved them all by: enrolling in a full time PhD program at NYU, starting in the fall of 1951, thus getting an army deferment; convincing the union to let me work full time for a New York local--I was assigned to Local 38, the Custom Tailors and Alteration Workers, starting in the fall of 1951; and pursuing Sylvia and getting her to marry me, which we did in December of 1951.

And after we were married, we set up housekeeping in apartment B63. Eighteen years after my mother and I moved into the apartment, my wife and I take possession. And we were going to make it ours, not my mother's. And we do it with a vengeance. Two kids who had no idea of the value of the furniture and the other items, got rid of almost everything to a second hand furniture dealer: the china closet, the bedroom suite, the lamp table and the cut glass lamp, the marble bust, the old fashioned bookcase and the Yiddish books, the old victrola and the record cabinet with the 78 rpm records; the beautiful cut glass plates and pitchers and vases were given away as wedding presents.

The Limoges china was replaced by Russell Wright. The old fashioned furniture was replaced by Herman Miller. The bookcase was replaced by brick and board. My mother's curtains were taken down and replaced by modern drapes with a ballet dancer motif. The new shower curtain featured New Yorker cartoons by Robert Taylor. Sylvia

moved three blocks up Fox Street from apartment 3A in 642 Fox St. to apartment B63 in 783 Fox St. Our lives were hectic but happy.

The landlord was granted another increase, raising the rent to \$31. OK. But in 1953, we were notified that we were to pay an additional \$2 for a roof antenna for the television. We didn't have a television, and we didn't intend to get one, so we objected and refused to pay. The landlord brought us to court. This was going to be fun. How could he charge us for something we didn't have. However, the judge concluded that we were to pay for the right to put up an antenna in the future. So now our rent was \$33.

In June 1954, I was finally drafted, and after basic training at Fort Dix, I was shipped to Camp Rucker in Alabama as an I and E NCO and mail clerk. I found an apartment off-post and Sylvia joined me in the fall, leaving our apartment, but having distributed keys to a variety of friends and relatives. We continued to pay the rent and utilities, knowing that we would be back. A few months later, I was reassigned to Camp Gordon, Georgia, and we packed our newly acquired belongings and as a brand new driver in our newly acquired car, I drove from Enterprise Alabama to Augusta Georgia.

Apartment B63 was well cared for, and whenever we returned, the refrigerator was stocked for us. Finally, on February 29, 1956, I was discharged, and Sylvia and I once again took up residence in B63, but this time with a four month old baby daughter. The apartment was now a bit snug. And over the years, the neighborhood changed—from majority Jewish in the '30s to increasingly Puerto Rican and black in the '50s. Many of our friends and neighbors had moved to the West Bronx, and we began the process of looking for a larger apartment, getting the Sunday Times Saturday evening and scouring the "apartments for rent" columns. We had hoped that we could find something on the upper west side of Manhattan, but after months of looking, we found nothing we could afford. Finally, we decided to expand our geographic horizons to include Brooklyn.

One year after we had begun our search, we found a four room apartment in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn which we could afford. The apartment house was modern, attractive, near the subway, and on a quiet, tree-lined street, Sterling Place. We knew nothing about the neighborhood, but what we saw, we liked. It looked middle class, integrated, cared for, the street filled with charming brownstones, near the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, and a block away was a small park and the Brooklyn Children's Museum. And the rent was \$115 a month, which was a bargain. It was more than three times the rent we paid for B63, but it was much newer and more than double the size. So, as summer began in 1957, we said goodbye to Fox street and to my home for 24 years. Most of the people I had grown up with had moved away. I believe the only neighbor from my childhood was Mr. and Mrs. Handwerger, and they remained because of their dry cleaning store around the corner.

Over the years, when I visited New York, I would try to drive through the neighborhood, and it was painful to see the deterioration. The buildings were neglected, there was garbage in the street, and there were gates and bars covering windows and doors. The garden and grass of 783 Fox Street was replaced by cement, and a huge gate prevented

entry into the courtyard. On one occasion in the late '90s, I returned, entered the building, took the elevator to the sixth floor and rang the bell to B63. A Puerto Rican family was living there, and I explained that I lived in this apartment for more than 20 years. I was ushered in and invited to look around. Forty years later, and it wasn't very different, despite the fact that it was older, seemed smaller, and was furnished differently. A few years later, I visited the neighborhood with friends and was thrilled by the improvements that had taken place. Blocks of tenements were replaced by garden apartments, and 783 Fox St. seemed better cared for. I felt the neighborhood was coming back. It was no longer a slum, and a new generation was growing up on the same streets and in the same apartment houses that I and my friends did. I only hope that they will have the same opportunities that we did.