

A Roof Over Your Head (Part 2)
From 960 Sterling Place to 77 Pond Avenue

960 Sterling Place, Brooklyn

When Sylvia and I saw the neighborhood and the building in 1957, we were impressed. Sterling Place was a tree-lined street with charming brownstones. 960 Sterling Place was a luxury six-story, light brick building on the corner. It was like my old apartment house on Fox Street, but newer. It had a small courtyard, a lovely entryway and lobby, and an elevator. Our apartment on the fourth floor had lots of light, a large kitchen and dining area, a living room, two bedrooms and a bathroom. Perfect. And all for \$115 a month. It was two blocks from the Nostrand Avenue subway station, and there were lots of stores on Nostrand Avenue. The Brooklyn Children's Museum was a few blocks away. Less than a mile down Eastern Parkway was the Brooklyn Museum, Prospect Park, and the Main Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza.

Why was such a lovely apartment in such a lovely building being rented for such a low rental? It seems that Crown Heights in 1957 was a neighborhood in "transition." Located between predominantly black Bedford Stuyvesant and predominantly white (and Jewish) Flatbush, few white families were interested. We were coming from the East Bronx, which had already transitioned ten years before—from a Jewish neighborhood to a predominantly Puerto Rican and black neighborhood. Saul Alinsky is supposed to have said that an integrated neighborhood is that moment in time between all white and all black. If this was the moment, it was all right with us. And we planned to do our bit to keep it an integrated neighborhood. Unbeknownst to us at the time, Crown Heights was becoming the World Headquarters of the Lubavitch Hasidim. They did more than their share to keep the neighborhood "integrated," as well.

We made the move from Fox Street. We had furnished our Bronx apartment with Eames chairs and Herman Miller cabinets, tchotchkes from Greenwich Village, Russell Wright dishes and Danish modern stainless steel flatware. And we met several families in our Brooklyn building with similar tastes. We loved our new neighbors, the Zelwians and the Plotkins, and a whole gang of left wingers who lived a few blocks away at 97 Brooklyn Av. Everyone seemed, bright, talented and politically involved. Henry Zelwian was an artist; Ed Plotkin had been a big band musician. A few years later, the great jazz musician Bobby Timmons and his wife and son moved in.

We picketed Woolworths, joined the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and Sylvia became part of an amateur theatrical group. When Martha was born, we switched bedrooms, giving the kids the big bedroom. Elementary school presented a challenge. PS 138, the neighborhood school, was old and the student body was overwhelmingly poor and black. Carol, then Lewis, suffered through it. I felt as if we were sacrificing our children on the altar of integrated education. I believe that most middle class black families in the neighborhood sent their children to private schools.

In the fall of 1964, I was offered a position in Washington. Sylvia and I talked, she said yes to the move, and I said yes to the offer. In December we found a house to rent in the Shepard Park area of Washington. This northeastern corner of Northwest Washington was the only neighborhood in which we looked. We had friends there, and it was clearly the place for us.

8160 Eastern Avenue NW, Washington DC

Over winter break in December 1964, we moved into a big, nondescript house on a thoroughfare which was the border between Washington, DC and Silver Spring. The rest of the houses on our side of the street were very similar. Modern, most likely constructed in the 1930s. Why was it for rent, rather than for sale? (and as above, for a reasonable rental.) Because it was next to a much larger house, whose owner, Gus Pappas, bought it when it was put on the market. His reasoning: if he didn't buy it, a black family might buy it. Owning it, he was in a position to determine who his neighbor would be. We were unaware of this at the time.

Seems we moved from one neighborhood in transition to another. However, our new Washington neighborhood was very different from Crown Heights. It was richer, well cared for private homes, and it was organized. Several years earlier, when threatened by blockbusting, the home-owners created "Neighbors Incorporated" to prevent white flight and make sure the area stayed integrated. It was a much more upscale community: Professionals, academics, government officials. Nothing like my old Brooklyn neighborhood.

The house was large and comfortable. We had a big back yard, and just beyond our yard lived Hilda and Charlie Mason; she was black and he was white. Both were politically active. Our daughter Martha and their grandson Nestor became fast friends. Carol and Lewis attended the Shepard School. When Carol came home after her first day, she announced with satisfaction, "Now I know what an integrated school is." Shepard's black to white ratio was closer to 50-50, instead of PS 138's 99-1.

7516 14th Street

We loved the community, made lots of friends, and decided to look for a house to buy. Within a year, we found 7516 14th Street. It was a beautiful frame three bedroom, just like all the other homes in the area. A lovely living room, with a fireplace, a charming dining room, kitchen and a half bath, on the first floor. Three big bedrooms on the second floor. A basement, an attic and a great back yard and a garage.. All for \$25,500. We grabbed it.

I became "Harry Homeowner," and a regular patron of Hechinger's hardware. I bought a hand lawn mower. We didn't have a very large lawn. We had azaleas in the front, and a pear tree in the back. I planted a small flower and vegetable garden. Sleeping arrangements: We started out with the parents in the master bedroom, the girls sharing the second bedroom, and Lewis in the third. Eventually, we turned half the attic into a bedroom for Lewis, and the girls each had their own bedroom. The spring before Lewis's Bar Mitzvah, we finished the basement. That was a major undertaking. I bought lots of tools, including a circular saw; learned how to smooth the cement floor and lay carpeting; put up 2 X 4s, and paneling and lights. I had lots of help, but still, it was a major undertaking. I learned a lot about construction which I never had occasion to use again.

I really liked the house, the neighborhood, and the neighbors. It was easy getting to and from work by public transportation--the S-2 bus. We parked our car in front of the house. Shopping was convenient. Life was good. However, in 1972, Sylvia and I separated. I said goodbye to the house, the neighborhood and the neighbors. I looked for another place to live. My friend Dan Jordan, who had been through a divorce, advised me to get "a nice place."

2121 P Street, NW

I came up with a winner: a one bedroom apartment in 2121 P Street NW, a luxury apartment building off Dupont Circle, with a swimming pool. I was within walking distance of work, near Georgetown, and Connecticut and Massachusetts Avenues, and near shopping. I furnished it comfortably, and made myself at home. I liked the address: 2121 P Street. However, letters from the Jewish Labor Committee were addressed to 2121 Avenue P, as if it was Brooklyn. The kids joked about the cross-streets: 21st and Pee.

The separation was difficult, but I saw the kids each week and we managed to have fun: swimming, going to museums and movies, eating out (and eating in), exploring the city and Rock Creek Park. It was a great location, and I entertained, and lived the life of a bachelor. Toward the end of my seven year stay, just before I moved to Boston, the owners were negotiating to convert the building from rental to condominium. Some of the tenants organized to stop it, and I joined the effort. I previously had little contact with my neighbors. Just as I was getting to know them, I left. One of the tenant meeting was held in my apartment. A neighbor was impressed by my Prestopino print. I asked if he was familiar with Prestopino. He replied that he was the curator of prints at the Hirschhorn,

In the midst of the negotiations, I moved to Boston to become the New England Regional Director of the US Civil Rights Commission. I later learned that not only was 2121 P St NW converted into condominiums, the condominium was later taken over and converted into a luxury hotel.

371 Beacon Street, Boston

So, in 1979, I said goodbye to 2121 P St. NW, and hello to 371 Beacon Street. Friends who knew Boston suggested I check out the Back Bay and Beacon Hill. While shuttling between Washington DC and Boston, I visited several realtors. One realtor showed me an apartment on the third floor of 371 Beacon Street, near Fairfield, smack in the middle of the Back Bay. It was charming (meaning small.), and the rent was reasonable. It did not have a swimming pool, but it was a lovely brownstone with the Charles River one block north, and Commonwealth Avenue one block south. It too was within walking distance of my new office on Summer Street. And the walk took me through the Boston Gardens and the Common. It was a wonderful way to start the day.

However, within a year, the landlord began the process of converting the apartments into condominiums. Condominium conversion was a contagion. The landlord's agent explained to all the tenants that there would be major renovations taking place, and it would be advisable to move out. In fact, he would forgo the last two months rent. When I hesitated, he even sweetened the pot. It was the spring of 1981, and Fran and I were getting serious. She owned a large one bedroom at 520 Beacon Street. I decided to look in Brookline for an apartment.

514 Harvard Street, Brookline

I found a two bedroom condominium at 514 Harvard Street in Brookline—but just barely in Brookline. When Fran lived in Brookline, before she moved to Beacon Street, she lived around the corner on Verndale Street. I envisioned 514 Harvard Street as our “love nest.” We furnished it with the best of both our belongings. I became a condominium owner. Fran became a landlord. She rented out the apartment that she loved to an undergraduate, and we moved into our new home. In a few months, baby made three. Soon after we moved in, we realized that this

was going to be a short-term arrangement. Shlepping up the stairs with groceries and a carriage was no fun. The neighbors were pleasant enough. Young couples. (I was going to say “like ourselves” until I realized we were not exactly a young couple.) It was 1981, and there were lots of reasonably priced houses on the market, in part because the mortgage rates at the time were astronomical.

We found a realtor who knew the Brookline housing market, and she showed us several lovely homes. The loveliest was 40 Evans Road. It was a picture book house on a picture book street, and was on the market for much less than it was worth. But people were not buying until mortgage rates came down. We grabbed it, even though it was much bigger than we wanted: A large living room with a fireplace, a formal dining room (with wall paper that Fran described as being from the Austro-Hungarian Empire), an eat-in kitchen (which Fran wasn’t crazy about), a pantry and a bathroom, on the first floor. And four bedrooms and a bath on the second floor. An unfinished attic and basement. And a spacious back yard and a two car garage. I believe we got it all for \$165,000.

Now all we had to do, was to sell the condominium. However, as I said, people weren’t buying. Our wonderful realtor could not find a buyer. If we can’t sell it, perhaps we can rent it, as we rented Fran’s condo. We decided to do it ourselves. We advertised it, and there were several interested parties. We felt that we did not want to take advantage of anyone. We set the rent at an amount a few dollars more than our mortgage, maintenance fee and taxes. How do you pick a tenant? Someone who looks trustworthy, will not trash the place, and can pay the rent. Most everybody who showed an interest met those qualifications. (The story of how we rented, and eventually got rid of the condo, is told elsewhere.)

40 Evans Road

As I described above, 40 Evans Road was a lot of house on a fantastic street. We didn’t realize it, but we were smack in the middle of a modern Orthodox Jewish enclave. When the house next door was put on the market, it was bought by the son of the “Bostoner Rebbe,” Mayer Horowitz. All around us were Orthodox academics and professionals. Many were members of Young Israel; a few were associated with Beth Pincus, the Bostoner Rebbe’s congregation.

Despite the outrageous interest on our mortgage, it was a bargain. We had a small apartment on the third floor which we rented, and even rented out a parking space in our driveway. I loved our living room. It was large, with a picture window facing the back yard, and a fireplace. Fran looked forward to the day when we would open it up, replace the picture window with French doors, and put in steps. We had a large front porch, and I loved the feel of our formal dining room. True, Fran did not like the wall paper, but I did not mind it at all. The location could not have been better. It was two short blocks to the Green Line C train. Another couple blocks to the D train, in case there was a problem with the C train.

After a few years, Fran became unhappy with the kitchen. It was old fashioned, and there was an unused chimney blocking the way to the pantry. To modernize the kitchen, the chimney would have to be removed. Fran hired an architect to remodel the kitchen, and plans were drawn up. Fran was ready to go ahead until she learned the cost. A lot. We had three choices: Leave it the way it was (my choice); remodel (no longer Fran’s choice); or sell the house and move.

We agreed that the house was much bigger than we needed. The value of housing was going up and the interest rates on mortgages were coming down. What would make sense would be a nice condominium. We were back in the market again, looking to buy and to sell. We found another realtor, who actually did find a buyer for us, and a condo that was for sale.

16 Greenough Street

It was the mid-80s, and a time when one did not have too much trouble buying and/or selling houses, especially in Brookline. It was clear that this is where we planned to live. Fran suggested that we look at condominiums. I was not willing to give up the story-book (or magazine) "house and garden." We looked, and in no time we came up with just the story-book house that I imagined, which was also a condominium. And it was less than a half mile from where we were living: A two-family condo.

It had once been a large one family, but it was very cleverly divided. The part of the house that was for sale was described as a three bedroom, two and a half bath. It had a lovely entry way, a living room on the right, behind clever sliding doors, which led to a spacious dining room, which led to a large kitchen, which led to a back door, which led to a back yard and a small garden. On the left was a room which lent itself to an office or bedroom, and a bathroom, and a down staircase to the basement, and an up staircase which led to two bedrooms and another bathroom. Perfect.

The other half of the house was owned by the Dunhams: a family consisting of a charming light-skinned African-American man, Royal, his not so charming Italian wife, Ida (pronounced Eeda), and two teen-age kids. They had the other half of the second floor and the third floor. We liked the house, but we wanted to meet the family with whom we would be sharing it. When I called, asking to meet them, Ida said no. I asked why. She said, "We are not a condition." It took me a few minutes to figure that out. She continued, "If you like the house, buy it, but we are not a condition." In a way, that made sense. We did finally meet before we closed on the house. Royal was very pleasant, and I knew we would get along. We agreed upon the monthly maintenance fees, and whatever repairs were needed, over the years. He worked for the US Comptroller of the Currency, and I deferred to him on most money issues. Ida blew hot and cold; we found ourselves walking on eggs when it came to many of the esthetic changes that were considered: the plantings and the choice of colors for the exterior. Once, when Fran hung some wet laundry in the back, Ida objected, telling Fran that this is not Naples.

An observation about their children: They both were light skinned and could easily pass. The girl was a year or two older, and she spoke Italian. It appeared to me that she saw herself as more Italian than black. Ida was a travel agent, and the family visited Italy annually. Her brother (who must have known Italian as well) chose to hang out with the few black kids at Brookline High, and saw himself as black. They both were bright and went on to good colleges.

We were happy in our home. David had his bedroom, we had our bedroom, Fran had her office on the first floor, and I arranged an "office" for myself in a corner of the dining room. But what I really loved was the basement. I set up a section in which I had a couch and a radio-phonograph, a tape recorder, a TV and books and a lamp. It was a wonderful place to get away. Unbeknownst to me, David used it to get away as well. He had his Nintendo there, and would not only play his games with his friends, he would also play my comedy records, including some of the more "adult" ones.

I also had a workbench in the basement, something I had transported from Evans Road. Whatever repairs were needed to be made, I made them there. I also continued to do some sculpting on the workbench. My big undertaking was a bas relief of Fran and David. It was a challenge working outside the classroom without the guidance of a teacher, but I did it. But it was the only piece I did.