

7 Relaxing in Bronx Park

When I was about nine years old, my mother began a routine which we followed until I was a teen-ager: After lunch on a warm Saturday or Sunday afternoon, we would leave our apartment on Fox St., my mother with her newspaper, *Der Tog* (The Day), and walk to the trolley stop at the corner of Southern Blvd. and Longwood Av. During the summer, the wooden sides of the trolleys were removed, leaving the wire grating, which gave the cars an open feeling, breezy, and much more fun to ride. And we would ride the trolley to the end of the line: Bronx Park.

It was a short ride along Southern Blvd., no more than 20 minutes, but it took us through the colorful center of the East Bronx, now called the South Bronx. We passed the Intervale Avenue Synagogue, St. Athanasius Church, the Hunts Point Public Library, Hunts Point Palace, Vim and Davega department stores, several movie houses, F. W. Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent Store, and The Public National Bank. As we approached Westchester Avenue, the trolley went under the elevated trains whose overhead tracks turned from Westchester Avenue to Southern Boulevard. And we passed lots of apartment houses. I felt sorry for the people who lived in those houses because their apartments faced the El and they were constantly bombarded by the noise of the trains and the trolleys.

The fare then was five cents. Children under six rode free, and my mother passed me off for under six until it was clearly no longer the case. Getting on the trolley, my mother pushed me past the motorman who eventually began to express skepticism about my age.

When we got to Bronx Park, the motorman would announce "Last stop, everybody off." Then he would go through the car flipping all the seats so they now faced the back. I would stand outside to watch as he then lowered the bar at the back of the car that made contact with the overhead power lines. He then raised the bar in the front, making the front of the car the back. Taking a metal rod, he moved the tracks so that the car would return on the parallel tracks on the other side of the street. Watching this was as much fun as the Bronx Zoo which was awaiting me.

There were two main entrances to the Bronx Zoo. We always entered on the corner of Southern Blvd. and Fordham Road, which was the last trolley stop. The other main entrance was on Fordham Road, but that would have meant a long walk around the block, and walking was difficult for my mother. The Bronx Zoo should not be confused with the Bronx Botanical Gardens which was across the street., although its entrance was several blocks away. Looking back, I am sorry we never went there. My mother would have loved the flowers.

There was no admission charge, and when we entered the park, we would walk down a long tree-lined path. Attendants inside the park answered questions and helped you find exhibits, but my mother and I knew exactly where we were going. At the end of the entrance path, a path forked to the left which led to a small pond and a row of benches

facing the pond. My mother sat down, took out her newspaper, observed the scene: the pond, the ducks and geese, the sky, the trees, the people, and then she read.

And I would begin my adventure aimlessly wandering through the entire zoo. Behind the fences closest to the entrance were the deer, all kinds of deer, and as I continued to walk I came to an enormous cage with hundred of birds. Soon, I discovered the elephant house, then the lions and tigers, the bears, the giraffes, the reptile house, and the monkeys. By this time, it was getting late and I headed back to my mother, but I would swing by the pool with the seals, near the Fordham Road entrance. It was fun to watch them swim and dive, and occasionally, if I was lucky, I arrived when they were being fed. An attendant had a bucket of fish and would throw a fish to each seal. The attendants were very fair, and made sure that all the seals received an equal share.

When I rejoined my mother, we would have some fruit, and if she remembered to bring a few slices of bread, I would feed the ducks and geese. Over the years, I felt very possessive about my Bronx Zoo. I could find my way blindfolded.

But then, as a teen-ager, I no longer went to the zoo with my mother. I had my friends and we would go downtown, or to a movie, or to a ball game, or to a museum, or just hang out. I thought of the Bronx Zoo as a place for kids.

And over the years, the Bronx Zoo changed. The animals were taken out of the cages and put in open areas. The big bird enclosure became an aviary in which people could enter. Rides and restaurants and souvenir shops were added, and they charged admission. It was no longer a place where a kid could wander around while his mother read a Yiddish newspaper on a bench in front of a little pond.

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