15 Being Poor

Being poor isn't so bad when most of the people around you are poor. The people I feel sorry for are the ones who are poor when everyone else is well off. That's poor planning. You wonder, "What's wrong with them?" And then you realize that they didn't get much of an education, or they don't speak English, or they are not white, and if they have jobs, they don't get paid much. So if you are going to be poor, be poor when most everyone else is poor. Which is how my mother and I did it.

Most of the families in my neighborhood in the East Bronx in the 1930's were poor, but we didn't make a big deal of it. We didn't feel poor. Hey, it was the depression. President Roosevelt told us that one third of the nation was ill-clothed, ill-housed and ill-fed. But that really wasn't us. Our clothes were old, but they fit. We had a roof over our heads, and we had food. I guess we were in the second third: poor, but not the most poor.

My neighbors lived in nice but aging, five and six story walk-up apartment houses, now referred to as tenements. The typical family consisted of a father, a mother and a couple of kids, sometimes a grandparent or two, and in order to pay the rent, there was frequently a boarder.

The immigrant Jews who came to New York in the early 1900s usually lived on the lower east side, and worked in the sweatshops or peddled. Those who achieved a measure of success, moved to Harlem, and then, if they really made it, they moved to the Bronx. The most successful: the garment workers who became contractors, or the peddlers who opened a small store, moved to the West Bronx; the rest came to the East Bronx.

The parents of most of my friends worked in garment shops, but there wasn't much work. The term used to describe this condition was "slack," And it was slack for a long time. When there was work, they were able to pay their bills. Unfortunately, my mother was unable to get work, and we found ourselves "on relief." There was some shame attached to being on relief. We didn't go around telling every one that we were getting welfare, but somehow people knew. Observant neighbors would notice the welfare worker when they came to "visit."

From time to time, surplus food was distributed to those on relief. This may have been promoted by Henry Wallace when he was Secretary of Agriculture to benefit the farmers as well as the poor. Families on welfare would go to the Welfare Office and receive bags of flour, or dry skim milk. My mother didn't do much baking, so we passed the flour on to neighbors who did. And when we tried to mix the dry skim milk with water, it always came out lumpy, and I would gag on it. We stopped bothering with the surplus food. To this day, I can't stand powdered milk.

In elementary school, the kids on relief received "free lunch." Another way of identifying those who were poorer. At lunchtime, there were three groups: those who went home for lunch; those who brought their lunch to school; and those who lined up in

the gym to get the free lunch. I felt humiliated as one of the few boys in my class to line up for this hand-out. The teacher in charge was a frightening older woman with dyed red hair who taught the "ungraded" class, a collection of discipline problems which only she could handle. And she treated those of us receiving this largesse the same way: yelling, threatening us, warning us that if we made noise we would get no lunch. It was a sight out of Charles Dickens. And the lunch consisted of watery tomato soup, a sandwich and a container of milk. To this day, I can't stand tomato soup.

When I moved on to junior high school, we were coming out of the depression and my mother had gotten a job in a WPA garment factory. The pay was minimal and we were still entitled to the occasional handouts from the welfare office. It was the winter of 1940-41 and my mother learned that winter jackets were available for children. She picked up a jacket for me. It was a plaid that I didn't care for, but it was warm.

In my new jacket, I entered the schoolyard where we lined up, and I noticed about 10 or 15 other boys wearing the same jacket. The kids on welfare stood out as if we wore signs. One of the other wearers was my friend Tony Rodriguez, the only other kid in my class with the tell-tale coat. We nodded knowingly to each other. But it was cold, and the jackets kept us warm.

A few weeks later, Tony came to school with another jacket. I went over to him and asked what happened to the welfare jacket. He smiled and told me that he hated that God-damned uniform, and one evening when he was hanging out with friends in front of his house, making a fire to roast "mickeys" (potatoes stolen from the neighborhood vegetable store), he decided to throw the coat into the fire. He then returned home and told his mother how lucky he was: he tripped, fell into the fire, but was not hurt; just his coat got burned. His mother was so happy that he was alright, she went to the store and got him a new coat. I still had my jacket. To this day, I can't stand plaid jackets.

Feb. 15, 2006
Revised 5-30-06