

ETHNICITY AND MY CITY

I always liked the line from Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (?) where he discovers that he is speaking prose. This came to mind as David is working on a paper about Jews and blacks and Italians in New York and other urban centers. What David is reading about is in many ways what I lived, like speaking prose.

Growing up in the Bronx in the 30s, I used to laugh when Jews were called a minority. In my neighborhood, we were the majority and everybody else was a minority. Through the 30s, 40s and 50s, it was estimated that the Jewish population of NY was 3 million out of 7 million. Jews predominated in large sections of Brooklyn and the Bronx as well as Manhattan, and there was an increasing number of Jews in Queens. I had a cousin who lived in Astoria and then moved to Forest Hills. The only borough without a meaningful Jewish population was Staten Island. Lenny Bruce was right: if you were from NY, you were Jewish. We shaped the life of the city.

When they became successful, the Jews of the Bronx moved to Westchester; the Jews of Brooklyn moved to Long Island and the Jews of Manhattan moved to New Jersey. There may have been minor deviations—from the Bronx to LI or Brooklyn to NJ-- but I think it generally was as I described. It reduced the Jewish population in the city, but not in the metropolitan area. The big question is with regard to the pull (to wealthier, more attractive and more prestigious neighborhoods; private homes instead of apartment houses) versus the push (from deteriorating housing, poorer neighborhood services, and especially the influx of low income minorities.)

My neighborhood, which we called the East Bronx and which is now called the South Bronx, had a minority community of minorities: both black and Puerto Rican, and a sprinkling of Italians, Irish and exotica like Finns and Chinese. My guess is that the Dawson St. area which was a black neighborhood constituted less than 10%, as well as another small pocket of Puerto Ricans. Our Assemblyman when I was a kid was Felipe Torres, and his son Frank went to school with us. Our junior high school was fed by my elementary school PS 62, which was almost all white, and by PS 39, which had black and Puerto Rican students, mostly in the "slower" classes. The few black students in 52 were in the slower classes, while there was a good representation of Puerto Rican kids in the faster classes. It should be noted that they were all American born. My graduating class, 9BR, in 1942, had 27 Jews, six Puerto Ricans and three "others."

The neighborhood began to change after World War II. There was an influx of Puerto Ricans, and a growing number of blacks leaving Harlem for the Bronx, much like the Jews in the 20s. By the 50s, more and more Jewish families left, but mostly for the West Bronx. Families could afford the higher rents of the Grand Concourse area, and the Jewish families that had been living in the West Bronx began moving to Riverdale, Yonkers, Scarsdale and other Westchester communities. The pull. Two phenomena contributed to the push: non-discrimination legislation and rent control. Black and Puerto Rican families moved into previously all-white apartment houses, and many white families concluded that it was time to leave. And the rents didn't go out of sight. I

believe the landlord was only able to raise the rent by 15 % on turnover. The rents were low to begin with: \$40-\$80 a month for a two or three bedroom apartment. And the landlords started cutting back on repairs and services, especially painting—from every year to every three years. And fewer janitors.

A commonly held theory with regard to neighborhood changeover is that blacks and Puerto Ricans felt less hostility in Jewish neighborhoods than in Italian and Irish neighborhoods. They were not welcomed by the Jews, but neither were they threatened. And when the Jews left, the Puerto Ricans and blacks took over their Synagogues, and it was both sad and amusing to see the many churches in my old neighborhood with Jewish stars in their windows.

In 1956, Sylvia and I, with a new baby, returned from the Army to our apartment on Fox St. The neighborhood had changed. I guess one third of the apartments were occupied by Puerto Ricans, and one quarter by blacks. The rest were mostly Jewish and elderly. There were no young white families moving in. We had a two room apartment in which I had been living since 1933. The rent then was \$25 a month. It had been raised to \$28, and finally to \$33, \$2 of which was for a TV antenna which we did not have. We did not feel uncomfortable, though we did not establish a relationship with any of the neighbors. Our friends had moved to the West Bronx and to Queens. A few friends had apartments in Manhattan, and we spent months looking for an apartment on the upper west side without success. Finally we decided to look in Brooklyn, and in the spring of 1957 we found an ideal apartment—four rooms, elevator, near the subway—on Sterling Place and New York Av--in Crown Heights. What kind of a neighborhood? It had been, and in some respects still was, a Jewish neighborhood, but it had a growing black population. And an established young, progressive white and mostly Jewish community. Crown Heights is located between Bedford Stuyvesant and Flatbush. It fulfills Saul Alinsky's definition of an integrated neighborhood: "That moment in time between all white and all black.

In the late 50s and early 60s when Carol started going to school, the neighborhood elementary school, PS 138, was predominantly black.