

A Roof Over Your Head

I have been thinking about all the places I have lived over my 81 years. There are lots of different ways to tell your story. Describing the places you called home is as good as any.

My first home was 566 Beck Street in the Bronx,. I have no memory of it. We left in 1933, when I was about five. My father died in 1931. I believe my parents moved into the apartment in the mid-twenties from Harlem. Moving to the Bronx from Manhattan at the time was coming up in the world. My mother told me it was a lovely four-room apartment. When I was in junior high school, I made a point of walking past it, on my way home to our apartment on Fox Street. It was a large apartment house with an inner court, similar to our Fox St. house. One difference struck me: Walking into the court, I noticed laundry hanging. We didn't have that in our courtyard. And 566 Beck St., didn't have an elevator.

Around 1933, my mother found a smaller apartment for less rent, at 777 Fox Street, a six story apartment house connected to 783 Fox Street. The building was much newer, having been built in 1927 (the same year as me) and it had an elevator. Ours was the only building in the area with an elevator, and for years I would take friends from school to my house for a ride. To operate the elevator, you pushed the elevator button and waited. If you didn't hear anything happen, you pushed the button again. When you heard the motor, you knew something was happening. The outer door had a diamond-shaped window and when the elevator was approaching your floor, you could see the light. The elevator stopped, and you opened the door. After opening the outer door, you reached in and opened the gate to the elevator. When both the outer door and the gate were closed, and you had entered the elevator, you pushed the button for your floor. The motor started and you started to move...slowly. It was a lot of fun when you are a kid.

Our apartment, A33, consisted of two rooms: one, a combination living room, dining room and kitchen and the other, a bedroom, with a bathroom in between. The rent was \$25 a month. Mr. Gordon, the owner, originally asked for \$30, but it was the depression, and many of the apartments were empty, so he accepted \$25. A year later, my mother saw that a similar apartment, getting lots of sun, opposite us in 783 Fox Street, on the sixth floor, was empty. She negotiated with Mr. Gordon to allow us to move there for the same price. From 1934 until 1957, from ages 6 to 29, apartment B63 in 783 Fox Street was my home. As a kid, my friends were drawn from the other tenants and from the neighboring houses: Marvin Bernstein, Eddie and Harold Handwerker, Danny Tannenbaum; and in 775 Fox Street: Larry Wilson, Miltie Greenspan and Albert Hockanen; and across the street—Danny Lala.

I have described this period of my life in some detail: my earliest friends; going to elementary, junior high and high school, part time jobs, my relationship with my mother; college, Sylvia, the ILGWU, my mother's death, my marriage, graduate school, the army. All of this in the 23 years from 1934 to 1957.

We kept our apartment, B63, the entire time that we were away while I was in the army. (The rent had risen to the astronomical sum of \$33 a month.) Returning to it in March 1956, was truly coming home. But we were coming home with a baby daughter and to a changing neighborhood. For the next year, Sylvia and I spent a great many Sundays looking for a new home. We would get the NY Times Saturday night and scour the Apartments for Rent section, concentrating on the west side of Manhattan, finding nothing that we could afford. By the fall of 1956, I had started working for the Jewish Labor Committee earning \$100 a week, which wasn't bad. We didn't want to spend more than \$125 a month for rent, but there was nothing decent on the upper west side for under \$175.

In the spring of 1957, we decided to expand our horizons. Someone mentioned Brooklyn. Are you kidding? For a boy from the Bronx, Brooklyn was a foreign country. We wanted a place that was easy to get to, with a nearby subway station. Turns out Brooklyn did have it. And as we started reading Apartments for Rent, Brooklyn, we noticed that the rents were more affordable. One Sunday morning, we made our way to a section of Brooklyn called Crown Heights. We had never heard of it. The main drag was Eastern Parkway, which we had heard of. And nearby were Grand Army Plaza and the Brooklyn Public Library, and Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Museum. Not bad. (We didn't realize that this part of Eastern Parkway was also the headquarters of the Lubavitch Hasidim.)

The apartment house, which had a four room apartment for rent, was 960 Sterling Place. It was a modern building, constructed in the '30s, attractive court yard, lobby, and elevators.

The rent was \$115 a month. The apartment was twice as big as our apartment on Fox Street. It had a large kitchen, dining area, large living room, and two bed-rooms. We signed the lease. We didn't have to look any further.

We liked everything about the choice that we had made. The neighborhood was mostly brownstones with a few apartment houses that seemed to anchor the corners. We were on the corner of Sterling Place and New York Avenue. Crown Heights was an integrated community located between Bedford Stuyvesant to the north and Flatbush to the south. Saul Alinsky once defined an integrated community as that moment in time between all white and all black. Both here and in our next home, we were dedicated to putting the lie to that definition. (However, we were leaving a neighborhood which may have confirmed it. Fox Street and our East Bronx neighborhood was overwhelmingly white and Jewish in the '20s and '30s, but after World War II the small pockets of blacks and Puerto Ricans expanded, and the white families ran, By the time we moved, in 1957, it was considered a Puerto Rican slum.)

We made friends with other families who lived in our apartment house, and in the area (97 Brooklyn Av.). It was painful for me to have to acknowledge that most of the young white families that moved into the area were pro-Communist. "The Party" was committed to recruiting black members and noisily advocated equal rights. They could have moved to all-white sections of Brooklyn or Long Island, but they chose to live here.

But I laid that aside, and we were good friends over the more than seven years that we lived there. Our two closest friends were the Zelwians and the Plotkins who lived one floor below and above us.

Henry Zelwian was an artist who taught art at Boys High School. I don't remember what Sonya did. They had a son, Eric, who became good friends with Carol and Lewis. I was very impressed with Henry's paintings. We bought a beautiful landscape that he did of the Flatlands section of Brooklyn, and a portrait of Sylvia. He was the first person I knew who smoked pot fairly regularly.

The Plotkins also had one son, Freddie. I liked the fact that his name rhymed with his father's, Eddie. Turns out that Freddie was named by his mother after her psychotherapist, Frederick Wertheim. Eddie was a paper salesman, but in his twenties had been a professional musician, playing trombone with a number of the big bands. One evening, in our apartment with the Zelwians and the Plotkins, I asked Eddie if he would play a little. He was very reluctant, not having played in years. I insisted and he finally agreed. He went to get his trombone and I watched, fascinated, as he put it together. He started to play a standard jazz piece, and tears came to his eyes. He stopped, put away his horn, and left.

There was an Orthodox couple that lived on our floor with whom we became friends.