Chapter 13.
My Father: Boss Carpenter-Contractor.

I have already related the incidents of my parents' marriage in 1909 and the unfortunate altercation which led to the eventual estrangement of my mother and my grandmother Bahsyeh for the rest of their lives. Soon after their marriage my mother and father went to live in Brownsville, Brooklyn, where I was born October 10, 1911 in a tenement house on Stone Avenue near Pitkin Avenue. This building was torn down in the 1920s and the site occupied by a bank.

All that I have related about my father's life in Nemirov, London and later still as an immigrant in New York is based on what I had heard from him as well as others. The accounts which follow are, for the most part, based on my personal experience beginning with my first remembrances and continuing through the years until his death here in Durham on January 17, 1963, exactly three years almost to the day after my mother died.

The earliest recollection I have of my father is when I was three, perhaps four, years old. We were living in a flat in a tenement house (the term apartment house came into use later and implied a more "modern" multifamily building) on Snediker Avenue, I believe, near Pitkin Avenue. This was a more "fancy" address; that is, a more modern building than the one I was born in a few blocks west on Stone Avenue. The house was of more recent construction and actually had steam heat in the public hallways, an improvement over the usual "cold-water" flats in the tenement houses built in the nineteenth century. We occupied a flat, I should say "apartment" because of the modern improvements, on the first floor.

One afternoon, it may have been a Saturday or Sunday, because my father was taking a nap on the "lunch," lounge, an armless sofa with a raised headrest at one end. Every Jewish home had a "lunch." I believe Harry Golden, editor of the *Carolina Israelite* published in Charlotte, once wrote a humorous and nostalgic piece about the "lunch." The lounge my father was napping on was covered with a shiny material, imitation leather, so to speak.

Our "lunch" was in the dining room where my father was asleep. He was a very hard worker and expended much physical energy on the job. He was very tired at the end of week's work and needed the afternoon nap to recoup his strength. Sometimes, when he had no contract jobs of his own, he worked for other boss carpenters and always gave the boss a full measure for wages received. Despite the risks involved, he preferred the prospect of greater earnings from carpentry labor jobs taken on contract for a fixed sum. Even as boss carpenter he still "used tools," that is he worked along with the carpenters he hired and thus earned not only his own wages, but also something above that for his "maestranza," a good Spanish word for his expertise, know-how.

So there was my father napping on the "lunch," in the dining room near a window that looked out on a very small court. I very clearly remember leaning out the window and then suddenly finding myself sitting with outspread legs on the cement pavement and seeing my father in stocking feet, with a distressed look on his face, coming through the courtyard door. I must have cried out when I fell awakening him.

I had landed in a sitting position, and not on my head. The apartment was on the first floor and the window out of which I tumbled must have been no more than five or six feet above the cement pavement. Just what took place after seeing my father coming through the door, I do not recall at all. The next scene of which I have any remembrance is a saloon with my father and me standing at the bar. The saloon was located on the northeast corner of Pitkin Avenue and Christopher Street. I assume that my father had a beer and I a celery tonic. But I vividly still remember that I had great difficulty walking because my behind, "tookhes," was smarting so that I could not freely move my legs forward feeling as if they were being held back.

Of somewhat later date, I remember my father adjusting wooden interior shutters on the windows of the apartment, a different one from that where I fell out of the window. I believe it was on Hinsdale Street. Apparently he made the shutters because we were going away, perhaps on vacation to the Catskill Mountains I now assume, though I really do not remember the reason. Also, I remember that it was in this same flat my father made a wooden rocking horse for me. I have a vague memory of sitting astride this horse. I was probably no more than three years old at the time.

We lived in rented quarters until I entered the first grade when I was six years old in 1917. During the first semester I was in school, P. S. 63, I do not remember the street it was on, but it was just north of Belmont Avenue. We lived a few blocks to the east in a three-family wooden house on Alabama Avenue. It was here that my aunt Libeh had stored her furniture when my uncle Louie was ill. They had to give up housekeeping temporarily. The apartment on Alabama Avenue is the last I remember of my very early childhood, infancy might be a better term, from where we moved to East New York, on the border with Cyprus Hills, to 638 Essex Street, between Dumont and New Lots Avenue. It was a two-family row house with all improvements including steam heat, both electricity and gas lighting.

Essex Street was at the far end of East New York. At that time, it was only partially built up, that is urbanized. There were very few private houses in Brownsville. The majority of the houses in Brownsville were multifamily tenements. As the population of Brownsville grew and as the children of immigrants grew to adulthood, many left tenement-house life behind and moved eastward to East New York into one- or two-family houses which were being built, mainly during the second decade of this century.

Essex Street and New Lots Avenue were literally on the border between the "sown and unsown," between open empty land and that already "developed" with

houses, between the city and the country. The area to the south of New Lots Avenue extending down to Jamaica Bay a mile or two away was still largely open land. It was generally referred to as "the lots," probably a Dutch word meaning countryside and harking back to when Brooklyn was part of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, before 1644.

There were only a few small houses scattered here and there, and even some small farms. The few streets which had been cut through the open land were still unpaved. Some of the area was actually swampland, that bordering the shoreline of the bay. The principal vegetation was a type of grass with what looked like a cigar at the top of each blade which we called "punks."

There were two types of "punks," one rather of small diameter and the other larger and a darker brown. In formal speech they were referred to as cat tails, a fact I never knew as a child. To the Jewish children on the block they were called "punks." It may very well be that the origin of the word punk is also of Dutch origin. For the life of me, right now as I write this, I can't remember the common botanical name for this plant. The larger, fatter, browner type did not burn as well as the skinny ones.

To drive off mosquitos, of which there were no lack in the summer and which doubtlessly were hatched in the shallows of Jamaica Bay not too far away, we would light these punks which would then smolder and emit a constant flow of smoke and drive off the mosquitoes. Another cause of the presence of mosquitos was that the city of New York dumped garbage in the swamps which were considered useless land at the time. Those were the days before "ecology awareness" and the discovery that the swampland, now called "wetlands," were literally the nursery of marine life. The garbage dumps were located about a mile or so to the west of Essex Street. However, when the wind came from the west, the smell, though not in full force because it dissipated somewhat because of the distance, still reached us, especially when the dumps were sometimes set afire. Then a pall of smelly smoke would overlay the whole area, the only benefit being that the mosquitoes where then driven away from the area as a whole.

Some of the boys on the block sometimes went down to the edge of Jamaica Bay, down to the Old Mill or to Fort Betsy to fish for killies, tiny little fish, minnows. There they would frequently would find horseshoe crabs, a animal that looked like a black oval pot cover or a headless and footless turtle with a long spine like tail. As a matter of fact, I actually did not like catching the little killies or carrying off a horseshoe crab, and so I never did. But I did watch the other boys do so. Some of the boys who lived on the block would actually go swimming at Fort Betsy or the Old Mill. My mother never let me wander off that far, and I did not dare to. She was very much against this "uncouth and low class activity" and I was afraid I would be given a good licking if I disobeyed her.

Some of the street names in the area recalled the Dutch past of Brooklyn, which too is actually a Dutch name. New Lots is a version of the Dutch Nieuw Lots,

meaning new farmland. The Old Mill, actually referred to an old Dutch mill which was still standing when we moved to East New York. I do not know what Fort Betsy actually referred to. I now venture to conjecture off the top of my head without any proof at all, that it was just an area on the shore where a military installation, a fort had been located during the Revolutionary War, or perhaps the word "fort" was a New Yorkese corruption of the word "ford" and may have refereed to a crossing over a body of a water, a ford. I do not know and am only imagining what the name may possibly have referred to.

The IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit) New Lots subway line was still in construction when me moved to Essex Street in 1917. We lived about five or six blocks beyond the last stop. The broker who sold my father the house, a Mr. Rosenstock who lived two houses away from the one my father bought, I still remember him talking to my father and saying something to the effect that the subway line will one day come to the neighborhood and we will not be so isolated from New York. I believe it was just about completed when we moved away from Essex Street in 1926. At least, I do not remember ever boarding the train at the last station located at the point where Ashford or Warwick Streets cross New Lots Avenue.

When we went to New York, Manhattan that is, we would walk to Pitkin Avenue and take the elevated train at the Linwood or Cleveland Street Station. This was the City Line of the BRT (Brooklyn Rapid Transit). There was a trolley line on New Lots Avenue, the last stop being just about three or four blocks to the east at Atkins Street, if I remember the name correctly. It was not a main trolley line with the usual long cars that carried perhaps fifty or more seated passenger. The cars on this line were considerably smaller, about half the size of those on main lines, and careened from side to side as they progressed screeching along the tracks.

The New Lots Avenue trolley line carried one to the Brighton Beach-Coney Island Line of the BRT that ran south through Flatbush and north to a main line where one transferred to a train going to New York. The trolley continued west to Rockaway Avenue in Brownsville, the last stop, on the corner of which were located the car barns. Here one could change to a trolley going south to Carnarsie, a lower middle class or working man's neighborhood populated by Italian and Polish families, or one going north into Brownsville proper to Pitkin Avenue and on to Liberty Avenue and beyond, a no man's land where Jews did not live.

There was a catholic church, a wood structure, on the next block, that is on New Lots Avenue between Essex and Linwood Streets. I never went inside the building, nor did I ever have any curiosity or interest to do so. Jews and gentiles, especially Catholics, never mixed at all. Russian Jews were especially afraid of priests who frequently had led unsuspecting Jewish boys and girls into apostasy encouraging intermarriage as a way to conversion. Jews considered conversion or apostasy as treason and a betrayal of the Jewish people and far more despicable than a mere change of religious faith.

The block we lived on was one-hundred percent Jewish. On Sundays in the summer when it was very warm, the main door of the church was left open. It was approached by a flight of steps ascending to a stoop high off the ground so that one could not see all the way inside when standing below on the sidewalk. I still remember how I was puzzled when I saw people – men, women and children – on their knees just inside the door where the congregation had overflowed. When we Jews prayed in the synagogue we either sat or stood up and read a prayer book following the cantor with each of us individually talking to God face to face. Here were people on their knees apparently afraid of their god and so had to cringe on their knees in front of him.

To the east of the church extending as far as the corner of New Lots Avenue and Essex Street, there was a large open grassed space, a churchyard surrounded by a wooden picket fence. In the middle of this yard there was a statue of a woman on a high pedestal. I soon realized that this was no ordinary statue, but probably an idol like one of the gods of the gentiles referred to in the Khumash, the Pentateuch, I was then reading in Hebrew school every day.

I do not remember if there was a child in her arms or not. But I do remember she was dressed in a long flowing garment, which to me seemed more like a nightgown. Every afternoon, that is every afternoon when I happened to be on the corner opposite the churchyard, an elderly man wearing a Derby hat would come by would come by. As he came abreast of the statue he would raise his hat as if greeting a person. This seemed like idolatry to me.

When I was a senior at Union College and a columnist on the college newspaper, the *Concordiensis*, I wrote a short humorous story of this childhood memory. The editor of the paper for that edition, suppressed that week's column. I only remember his last name, Wolman, a Jewish boy, and a recent immigrant from Poland. He later told me that he suppressed my column because feared it would have caused a "race riot," as it would doubtlessly have back in his native Poland from which he and his family had escaped only a few years before.

When my father bought the house on Essex Street, built in 1915 or 1916 or earlier, East New York was a newly urbanized area, that is an area developed by speculative builders who sold houses mainly to the overflow Jewish population from Brownsville. There also were some non-Jews in the neighborhood, those who had settled there before the developers took over and built new houses. These were mainly one- and two-family houses which were sold to young Jewish families from Brownsville.

Some Italians and Poles lived south of New Lots Avenue in a few scattered single family dwellings, some of which were hardly more than shacks constructed, not according to any formal preconceived plan, but rather according to the whim of the owners. There also a few small farms where the owners grew vegetables for their own use. Goats were the preferred livestock of the Italians who usually kept one or

two to provide milk for their families. The goats were not confined to the yards around the houses, but were allowed to graze freely in the open land outside.

I had two Italian acquaintances, not really friends, and not very close because all we had in common was the English language and nothing else. Our common ground was certainly not religion or food. Nor were their parents like mine, especially my mother, who placed an overburdening emphasis on achievement in school on me which I concluded was far below my mental capacity because I was unable to live up to what she expected of me. Nor did they have to play the violin. Whenever I tried to get out of practicing, my mother was relentless insisting that I absolutely must practice. My father would always say, "Leave him alone with the fiddle, you will never make a Mischa Elman out of him."

One of the Italian boys was Tony Benedetto. His family kept a goat. My father gave the other boy a nickname based on his Italian name, Shpahrahnteh. If I sometimes was not too neat about my appearance, I was always chided and asked if I wanted to look like Shpahrahnteh. He was a sloppy, but happy kid who did not have to go to Hebrew school, get passing marks in school or play the violin and whose parents did not harass him to do his homework. He always went about with one of the legs of his knee pants falling down with one loose long black stocking gathered around his ankle.

Boys wore knee pants in those days and long, black, cotton stockings. My mother made me wear white stockings and a high stiff "Buster Brown" collar with a large flowing red bow tie to school until I was at least eight or nine years old. So you can imagine the heckling and torture I went through at he hands of the other boys wearing the "regulation" long black stockings, who called me a "sissy.". I also had a "Buster Brown" haircut, that is I had long hair, long hair down to my ears and also bangs over my forehead.

Tony and Shpahrahnteh did not have to attend Hebrew school every afternoon right after being let out of public school before going home, nor did they have to practice the violin and do their homework before supper. They lived just south of New Lots Avenue in another world, the other side of the globe so to speak, far away with totally different customs and values from the Jews lived on the north side of New Lots Avenue.

There was also a Polish family who lived on Essex Street just south of New Lots Avenue who had cows. My parents always referred to the Polish woman as "dee panyeh," Ukrainian or Polish for madam, perhaps a nearer equivalent would be the Spanish "doña." Sometimes we actually bought milk from "dee panyeh."

My father bought the Essex Street house when he was about thirty-one or thirty two years old and just twelve years after having set foot in "dee Gawldene Medeena." He bought the house with about $100 down and three mortgages at a cost of $4,500. He soon paid off the third mortgage.

At first, my mother was very unhappy living in Essex Street. She used to complain, "Vee hawst'ih meer fahrshlehpt, oiveleh yawm!" [Where have you dragged me to, across the sea!] Literally, "oiveleh yawm," an hyperbole indicating far, far away and beyond. The distance which seemed so great and beyond measure to her was not so much geographical as cultural. Though the street we lived on was inhabited solely by Jewish families, non-Jews also lived in the neighborhood. In fact, the next block just above Dumont Avenue, was inhabited mainly by Italians. Also, on Shepherd Street, one more block to the east, which I would walk through on my way to P. S. 64 every school day, there were no Jews at all. I had no idea who lived there, other than that they were not Italians or any recent immigrant Europeans.

On Essex Street we were on the eastern frontier, so to speak, far beyond Jewish Brownsville. My maternal grandparents and my mother's sisters and brothers lived about a mile or so away in Brownsville. Also, my paternal grandparents and my father's siblings lived about the same distance away also in Brownsville. But for my mother it was "yeneh welt" [the other world, that is the world of the dead and departed]. She would rather have moved westward toward Prospect Park, to President Street in Crown Heights, where the more affluent Jews, the "awalraitnyiks" [all-right-nicks, nouveaux richeses] from Brownsville had settled in luxurious brownstone houses or "cahtedjes," cottages, rather than eastward to East New York with the working class Jews, not all of whom were not well-off enough to be able to buy their own homes like my father. He actually bought the house "on a shoestring," so to speak.

The fact that President Street was beyond her means did not deter her from aspiring to the better life, both cultural and economic which a high class neighborhood implied. But she was to get her wish within nine years or so, when we moved to Empire Boulevard between Kingston and Albany Avenues, a few blocks south of President Street, not quite as sanctified as the Holy of Holies, but at least in one of the adjacent courtyards of the Temple itself, Crown Heights.

As I already said above, my father who apparently was working somewhere in the neighborhood at time, bought this house with a down payment of $100 when he heard it was for sale. He undertook the burden of three mortgages: a first or a "standing" mortgage on which only interest was paid; a second mortgage, the principal and interest due within a specified period and which could be "called in" on short notice by the lender; and a third mortgage which he paid up almost immediately. The total price was $4,500.

It was a two-family house with a five-room flat with two bedrooms on the first floor and a six-room flat with three bedrooms on the second floor. The largest room in each flat was the kitchen located in the middle of the plan and entered from the hall. The kitchen had two windows which faced a small interior court, larger than a air shaft, shared with the adjacent house. It was a "row house," that shared its side walls, "party-walls," with the houses to either side.

We moved in just about when I entered the first grade. I had attended P. S. 63 only a couple of months or so before I was transferred to P. S. 64 on Belmont Avenue about two miles east of the first school, but in an entirely different world. After we moved into the house, occupying the first floor apartment, my father began a series improvements which increased the value of the house. He enclosed the front porch, had the whole house redecorated, planted some maple trees in front, set in four fruit trees in the backyard and also some rose bushes, from which my mother would make jam. He also removed the coal cooking stoves in the kitchens and installed gas ranges; removed the archaic light fixtures that utilized both gas and electricity and installed modern electric fixture; and also installed showers over the bathtubs.

One fine day the man who held the second mortgage on the house arrived to collect a payment. When he saw what my father had done, he called in the second mortgage to the dismay of both my mother and father They did not have the necessary cash to pay the man off. I believe it was about $1000 or more. My parents were distraught because they were in danger of having the house foreclosed.

At that time my father was doing some carpentry labor contract work for Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky who were building some one-family houses in Cyprus Hills. He became fast friends with a much older man, a Mr. James, who bought one of the new houses and for whom my father made some alterations and improvements. I do not remember Mr. James' first name, though it may have been John since his oldest son was so named and he may have been John junior. When Mr. James heard from my father that the mortgagor was calling in the mortgage, he lent my father the money to pay him off and saved our house from foreclosure.

My father sometimes took me along with him when he went to visit Mr. James. I still remember how respectful my father was to him, a man as old as my grandfather, and how warm Mr. James was to my father and to me. He collected rare coins and had some mounted in picture frames hanging from the wall which fascinated me and inspired me to collect coins too. Most of the boys collected stamps, but I preferred coins like M. James.

I remember him very well and still see him sitting in his chair in the parlor talking to me my father. He was a white haired gentleman, like my maternal grandfather Shaiyeh. I do not have as a clear a memory of Mrs. James a high school teacher of shorthand and typing. It was a revelation to me as a child, that though Mr. James was not a Jew, he was hardly like the rather uncouth goyim who lived south of us on the other side of New Lots Avenue. Nor was he like the goyim of Russia I had heard so much about, brutal drunkards who killed Jews in pogroms.

He was a manufacturer of bicycle pumps. His two sons, John and the other I think was called Walter, worked in the factory. John would come to visit us on occasion and sometimes tell my parents of his troubles, I sitting by an overhearing. He and his wife were having difficulties. They had one child, a little girl I believe. His

wife was Catholic and he was not. It seemed that it was over the child that so many of the difference between them had arisen. The younger brother Walter also came to see us. He was not as deep or serious as his older brother, that is how I remember him.

But now in retrospect, it is amazing to me, that in 1917 or 1918 my father, a Russian Jew about thirty-one or thirty-two years old, who had only been in America for twelve or thirteen years, had managed to buy his first house, was treated as equal by such good refined people, non-Jews, who came to his aid in time of great need and who continued to be warm friends. We lost touch with the James brothers when we moved away to Empire Boulevard. They were having great difficulty with their bicycle pump factory as more and more people left off using bicycles and travelled instead by automobiles. John often told my father of the difficulties the factory was having. Now that I remember Walter went to work for someone else and I think John did likewise after they closed down the factory which saddened both my father and mother. I visited the factory one or two times with my father. It was located on Atlantic Avenue in Cyprus Hills alongside the Long Island Railroad tracks.

Once established in his own house in East New York my father turned more and more to carpentry contracting and working for himself. When times were slack, as they were when the United States entered the Great War in 1917, my father who was still of draft age, though married and with two children, took a job at Messer's Drydock on the waterfront in Brooklyn. I do not know exactly what he did there, probably carpentry. I conclude that this must have been during the winter of 1917/1918 because of what happened to him while working outdoors at the drydock. One day he came home with his ears all covered with white bandages. I remember laughing when I saw him come into the kitchen. He told us that while he was working one of the men warned him his ears were frostbitten. The foreman, or whoever was in charge, sent him to the doctor or the nurse on the job on the drydock who treated his ears for frostbite. He wore those bandages for some time after that.

After the short episode of working for Messer's Drydock, he worked solely for himself, mostly carpentry contracting at first. After completing the job in Cyprus Hills where Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky had built, my father continued to work there for many of the people who had bought houses and wished to make some additions, particularly the enclosing of the front porches. This was how he came to know Mr. James who had bought one of the Kosanoffsky's one family houses. He not only enclosed almost all the porches of the houses there, but even expanded to other parts of Cyprus Hills and East New York enclosing tens and tens of porches.

My father devised a scheme, almost a mass production method of prefabricating the parts needed to enclose porches. These were all more or less alike differing only slightly in their dimensions. An almost uniform type of one- and two-family houses had been built in East New York and Cyprus hills during the first and second decades of this century. All had minuscule gardens in front enclosed behind

ornamental wrought iron fences and an open porch in front of the main door. My father conceived a system of panels for the lower sections between the columns supporting the roof, and French windows that swung open outward for the upper sections above the panels. Most of the porches were more or less the same size. After taking a few measurements he would make the doors, and windows and panels beforehand in our cellar which he used as a carpentry workshop. Once made, he carried the parts to the job and in about a day or so finished the job. My father always would say that he made his first capital building these enclosed porches in Cyprus Hills and East New York.

The basement of the house on Essex Street was the workshop, really a labor intensive factory. He sometimes hired carpenters to help him fabricate the parts of the porches. One in particular, I remember very vividly, Joe Enish, a Litvak, who wore a brown Derby hat all day working making windows, doors and panels. I believe I spoke of him before in reference to my uncle Eedl, my father's older brother, whose son Irving married Joe Enish's daughter Jean who lives in the Washington area and who comes to Durham for the weight reduction program at Structure House.

In those days there were very few trim factories that produced standard windows, doors or other trim. At least it would have been costly far beyond practicality to have a trim factory make standardized parts to enclose porches. My father invented the system for his own use and adapted it to each job. Without power tools, they were no-existent then, certainly not hand held power tools, using hand saws and planes and augurs and clamps and pots of fish glue, he prefabricated the parts needed to enclose the porches.

He sometimes also took on jobs that were especially difficult to plan and carry out. For example, there was a Mr. Deshefky who owned the corner house of Essex Street and New Lots Avenue. It was a three-story house with a store on the ground floor, occupied by a Mr. Krejecky the barber, and two apartments above, in one of which Mr. Deshefsky lived. He had just bought an automobile, a big one too, a Studebaker Big Six. He sometimes took some of the neighbors out for a ride to Highland Park. A water reservoir high up a hill was located in Highland Park and reached by a road ominously called "Snake Hill," because it wound and circled down from the reservoir down to Arlington Avenue. It was considered very hazardous in 1921 or 1922. Before beginning the descent down Snake Hill, Mr. Desefsky would caution the passengers, "Hawlt zikh in awrder!," [Hold yourselves in order!] and then with intense concentration and even fear, would maneuver the car slowly down the hill all the passengers silent and holding their breath.

Owning this splendid and expensive automobile, Mr. Deshsfsky decided to build a garage attached to the rear of the house on the Essex Street side. The problem was that he had left an enormous opening almost wide enough for two cars to enter, and also about twelve feet high. Where in the word was he going to get a pair of ready-made doors large enough and of exact size to fill that opening? My

father took the job. He built those doors by hand in the cellar. Fortunately, the lots behind our house facing Linwood Street were empty, so my father was able to take them out of the cellar through the rear door, carry them around the block to Essex Street and with the help of about four or five men hang them in the opening where they fitted perfectly. It was a sensational feat and all the neighbors on the block stood by in awe watching as my father hung those doors.

Chapter 14
My Father: Builder

In 1919 or 1920, my father bought his first automobile, an open, five-passenger Ford touring car. He was the first one of all the neighbors on the block to own a car, and also the first one in my mother's and father's families. The car was parked in front of the house. I used to stand guard to keep the boys from running their hands over it and possibly marring the bright black surface.

In those days Fords were affectionately called "Tin Lizzies." It was a "pleasure car," as were most privately-owned automobiles. It was used mainly to take us all out for a ride each night after supper. He also used the car to go to his jobs, but its prime purpose, as was the custom, was "for pleasure."

The customary drive in the evening was to Highland Park up to the reservoir and then back home down "Snake Hill." Or sometimes we would drive further afield in a westerly direction down Sutter Avenue, then Pitkin Avenue the main street and heart of Brownsville, out to Eastern Parkway, then circle around Grand Army Plaza and into Prospect Park making a complete circle of the park, stopping for a short while at the lake, and then back home by the same route. In the middle of Grand Army Plaza there stands an Arch of Triumph with a quadriga of galloping horses on top.

Not until my parents moved to Saint Johns Place around the corner in 1940 or so, and I was already working on my Ph. D. at Columbia University, did I come to realize that the Grand Army Arch was a triumphal arch commemorating the Union Army's defeat of the South in the Civil War. And not until I came to Duke and Durham did the full impact of this monument celebrating a victory, not over a foreign enemy, but over a brother, dawn on me making me very uncomfortable. Most Brooklynites, I included, for whom the Civil War was ancient history and not rooted in the past of their immigrant forebears, did not have any notion of the significance or the symbolism of the monument in the center of Grand Army Plaza. That the Grand Army Plaza commemorates the defeat of the South, or that Southerners, proud by nature in a way incomprehensible to northeners, might resent a monument to their humiliation, never entered their minds, nor mine all through my childhood. The plaza was a very pleasant open space, almost like Paris, a circle from which streets sallied forth like spokes of a wheel – Eastern Parkway, Flatbush Avenue, the main entrance to Prospect Park and other streets leading to the Park Slope neighborhood.

On weekends, especially on Sundays, we might take a ride on Merrick Road out to Long Beach, frequently through heavy traffic which always became denser and

denser as we neared Brooklyn so that we would move along at a pace no faster than walking. The Ford did not have a transmission with a gear shift and clutch, or even a foot accelerator on the floor. One slowed down by reducing the gas on the hand accelerator, a lever located just below the steering wheel, and stepping half way down on the clutch while applying the brake. To get the car moving again, it was necessary: 1) to advance the accelerator and; 2) step on the clutch: 3) then cut off the accelerator and; 4) release the clutch and; 5) advance the accelerator; all movements executed in rapid succession.

In slow and dense traffic, which was common on Merrick Road on Sunday evenings, being as it was a narrow two-lane road and the only one that gave access to the south shore of Long Island from Brooklyn, these maneuvers had to be repeated over and over again. And sometimes, as luck would have it, the motor stalled and my father would have to get out of the car and crank up the motor again. He would shout for me to reduce the spark as he was cranking the motor. Too much spark could cause the motor to "kick" and break one's arm. Just as the motor started, I would advance the spark and then the gas. Pop would rush back the driver's seat to ward off the motor stalling, readjust the spark and the gas. Then we would begin the crawl all over again.

I remember we were once coming back from a drive to Brighton Beach one hot Sunday afternoon and ran into a gridlock of cars as we came abreast of Ocean Avenue near Prospect Park and the Parade Grounds. The clutch pedal became so overheated, that it was painful for my father to keep applying it in the stop and go traffic. My mother always ribbed him about that telling all hearers how that night while asleep he had nightmares and kept crying out, "Nem avek dem clawtsch" [Take away the clutch].

My father suffered from hay fever attacks during the hay fever season when the golden rods were in full bloom, from about the middle of August to about the middle of September. Little or nothing was known about allergies in the those days, that hay fever was an allergy and not a chronic disease. In fact, on the recommendation of a doctor, he was operated twice on his nose to cure him of this affliction. I believe he said it was an Ear Nose and Throat Hospital in Manhattan.

Many years later, after we moved to Empire Boulevard in 1926, it was discovered that hay fever was an allergy and not a "disease." He was treated by a Dr. Robinson who had an office on St. John's Place near Franklin Avenue. He used to go there for a series of injections just before the hay fever season and got some relief.

But during the hay fever season while we lived in East New York, we would drive to Brighton Beach and park facing the ocean where he would get some relief from continual sneezing and running eyes. Frequently, he would have to stay at the ocean until mid-night before his nostrils cleared and he could breathe without incessant sneezing.

Dr. Robinson's tests indicated that my father was not only allergic to golden rods, but also to lilacs and especially to rag weed. No one knew then that rag weed flourished all over the city of New York in the empty lots and other open areas in Brownsville, especially in East New York which was still largely undeveloped. There we were living at the edge of a forest of rag weeds that extended all the way from New Lots Avenue down to Jamaica Bay. In the course of time, the hay fever allergy worsened and was exacerbated by a new complication, asthma attacks during the hay fever season.

Hay fever sufferers were counselled to go to the White Mountains of New Hampshire for relief, the only cure known at the time. The pure mountain air and the absence of rag weed apparently kept those afflicted with hay fever free of its symptoms. But he was never able to take the time off to go to the White Mountains. It would have required being away from work for about a month to six weeks. So all through my childhood and even as an adult, I recall my father sneezing and sneezing, using up countless numbers of handkerchiefs, Kleenex was still not invented, and at times hardly able to breathe except when sitting in the Ford at the sea side in Brighton Beach. It is interesting that in his old age beginning when he was about sixty years old, his allergic hay fever reactions diminished and eventually ceased. This may have been due to the fact that by that time my mother and father were living in an area totally built-up section of Brooklyn, Saint John's Place near the Brooklyn Museum. There was very little vegetation where they lived and no empty lots overgrown with rag weed.

Once we moved to Essex Street he worked for himself undertaking alteration jobs, at which he became expert. He knew how to estimate costs based upon his knack for being able to visualize less than obvious problems and devise means to solve them. Figuring alterations jobs was not as straightforward as new work, where demolition and construction had to carried on at the same time. In addition to alternation work, he also completed a considerable number of carpentry labor contracts in the construction of new homes, principally for the brothers Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky in East New York and Cyprus Hills. In fact, the house at 638 Essex Street which my father bought in 1917 had been built by the Kosanoffskys earlier in that decade.

As I already related, my father put together a small capital from small alteration and carpentry contract jobs, principally the enclosing of open porches during the first years we lived in Essex Street. Then in 1922 the opportunity arose for him to become a speculative builder.

Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky took a liking to my father, not because of his personality or any other personal factor, rather because they knew that he was reliable and had the know-how to run a construction job. They had dealings with him as a contractor and were certain that he was well able to superintend construction operations from start to finish and that they would not have to oversee the job

themselves. In 1922 my father was thirty-six or thirty-seven years old, had been working for himself for years, and had learned by observation of the ins-and-outs of the other trades such as plumbing, heating, electricity, plastering, painting, masonry.

Max and Pinyeh had a parcel of land in Astoria, Long Island (now a neighborhood in Queens reached by the subway from Manhattan) on which they planed to build about twenty one-family houses. Rather than undertake to supervise the job themselves and be tied down so they could not expand their activities to other speculative operations, they turned the project over to him. In other words, they took my father in as a "working partner." But they were wise indeed, they insisted that he also invest some of his own capital so that he could truly say the operation was his also. If I remember correctly, I believe he contributed about $2,000 cash as his share to capitalize the project. Max and Pinyeh invested considerably more money. But more important, since they were old-time builders and had excellent credit with the owners of the land and with banks and mortgage companies, they were able to finance the purchase of the land and secure construction loans which were converted to first mortgages when the houses sold. Each of the three partners drew $75 a week, but my father, the working partner, had to be on the job and supervise the whole project. Each of the brother's had a 40% share and my father a 20% share in the operation.

My father, ten or more years younger than Max and Pinyeh, was always respectful to them. He was always mindful that it was not because of any altruism on their part that they had taken him in as a 20% partner and given him chance to become a builder. My father always had the philosophy, belief or strong conviction, that a boss hires you "not because of your beautiful face, but because he can have some advantage out of you." And unless he gets something out of you, he does not need you. When I went off to take up my appointment here at Duke University, I still remember his words of advice, "Sidney, make the job good!" And he reminded me that I had to give value for the money received, even a little more value so that the boss would benefit.

Well, the Kosanoffsky brothers did not take my father in as a partner because of his "beautiful face." Astoria was some distance from East New York, and so Max and Pinyeh gave my father a Ford coupe sedan to travel to the job. It was a "closed" car albeit half the size of my father's first automobile, an open Ford touring car. All four of us would squeeze in on the seat, Esther on my mother's lap and I in between my mother and my father. This car operated on the same principle as the first "Tin Lizzie," though I believe it already had a "self-starter" and did not require being cranked up by hand.

Max and Pinyeh gave my father free rein on the job in awarding contracts, dealing with building-materials suppliers, deciding on costs for making changes in the plans when some of the buyers requested that the one-family plans be altered to

two-family plans. On Sundays, he also went to the job and he himself eventually sold all twenty houses of the project himself.

I was about eleven years old when my father worked on the Astoria project. I sometimes went along with him to Max's house to render the week's accounts and to report what was going on the job. My father always deferred to Max calling him "Mr. Kosanoffsky" and Max, because my father was much younger, would call my father Sahnyeh.

Max and Pinyeh were from a town in the same region in the Ukraine, Podolia, as my father and mother, not far from Nemirov. They were carpenters when they arrived in America. I do not know just when, but it was long before my mother and father. When my father first met Max and Pinyeh in Brownsville and East New York, they had been operating as speculative builders for some time. In fact, as I mentioned before, they built the house in Essex Street a few years before my father bought it in late 1917. Max and Pinyeh spoke the same Yiddish as my father and mother. Because the basis of their relationship was primarily business, my parents, who in addition were much younger and certainly far from as affluent as the brothers Kosanoffsky, especially Max, naturally did not socialize with them. I doubt very much if my mother ever met Max's wife or his children. My father dealt almost exclusively with Max and to a lesser degree with Pinyeh. Yet, in 1924 after the Astoria job was finished and my father no longer was partners with them, they came to my Bar Mitzvah. I am not too certain, but I believe Max gave me a gold fountain pen and pencil set. The pen and pencil were encased in gold cut in filigree pattern. I still have the pencil in the top drawer of my dresser. I had the pen, in rather ruined condition, until perhaps a year or two ago when I finally threw it away.

The two brothers worked as a team and could drive hard bargains with contractors. Max was the older brother and the "hard one" while Pinyeh, the younger of the two, was the "soft one." In keeping with tradition, he always respectfully deferred to his older brother, Frequently, as happens during construction, changes had to be made and the price for those changes agreed upon. The contractor would first go to Pinyeh, the "soft one," and explain that the change was not envisaged in the original agreement and that he would be out of pocket unless he were reimbursed. Pinyeh would listen, sympathize with the contractor and agree that he should be paid for the extra work. Then he would sigh, and say that if it were up to him he would pay the contractor for the extra work, but "Max wont let me."

Once, I think it must have been in 1930 or so, when my father was superintending the construction of Max's rather sumptuous house in Manhattan Beach, a problem arose regarding some detail which had somehow been overlooked in the specifications when giving out the contracts to the various trades. I believe it was a small balcony on the second floor which apparently was neither "fish nor fowl" with regard to exactly which contractor – carpentry, iron work, brick work– was to be held responsible for the job. Max was not ready to pay for this oversight and

turned to my father saying, "Sahnyeh, veymen rikt'men arahn dee kawneh?" [Sahnyeh, into whom do we poke this enema?]

When my father was taken in as partner in 1922, Max was living in a one-family house on Wyona Street near Sutter Avenue in East New York. There was an empty lot to one side with a garage where Max housed his automobile. The house was perhaps only about ten or twelve blocks from Essex Street. Max's son Looyeh, Louis, who was in high school at the time, kept the books of the Astoria operation. Max had two other children younger than Looyeh, a son whose name I do not remember and a daughter about two or three years older than me and called Eeteh, in Yiddish, perhaps Edith in English.

Max did not drive the automobile himself. He had a chauffeur, a very short Negro (today I should say Black) by the name of Gat. Gat lived a few blocks from us just south of New Lots Avenue. There was no especial racism with regards to Blacks in those days – all the different races or "ethnics" were equally suspicious of each other and socially isolated from each other as well. Poles, Germans, Italians, Jews, and even some Yankees, lived side by side in East New York and ignored each other when it came to socializing. So Gat was just another "ethnic" who worked as a chauffeur for Jews, mostly Jews in the construction business. He understood Yiddish and ate at the same table as his employers. He sometimes worked for Max Bawrenshteyn, Bernstein in English, who was to be one of the prime causes of the disruption and ruin of my father's building corporation in 1928.

Each week, as I already said above, my father came to Max's house to give the accounts to Looyeh who kept the books. Neither Max nor my father had any formal schooling nor were they literate in more than Yiddish and the Hebrew prayer book. Looyeh was for Max what I eventually became for my father, a living calculator. I imagine that if hand calculators been invented then, Looyeh would not have been as important to the Astoria operation as he certainly was then. Looyeh would usually be sitting near Max at the dinning room table and take the papers my father handed him. My father would give a list of the bills to be paid, Looyeh would write the checks and Max would sign them. I do not believe my father was empowered to sign checks, though he was a partner, a 20% partner. Max did the signing of the checks. I imagine Pinyeh could do so too, but I do not remember him being present the times I accompanied my father to render accounts once a week.

I was particularly interested in observing what Looyeh was doing, and it was from him that I learned the system of pasting cancelled checks back into the checkbook and listing those still not paid out then deducting them from the balance on the bank statement. I do not know if it was Looyeh who invented the system, or Max himself. Checks not pasted back are still outstanding and those pasted in give a ready physical history of expenditures.

Astoria had only recently been made more accessible to Manhattan by the extension of the IRT subway line. The first moving picture studios were located in

Astoria before they moved to Los Angeles because of the sunny weather there. It was during the Astoria operation in 1922 that my grandmother Bahsyeh died, one week after her fiftieth wedding anniversary.

This was an entirely new and very sad experience for me. I still remember coming into the Maryam and Hershel's flat on Rockaway Avenue where my grandparents lived, and seeing her laid out on the floor totally covered with blankets and sheets with candles at her feet pointed toward the door. Also the sobbing and crying of my aunts. Her's was the first funeral I ever experienced. I remember the hearse stopping for a moment in front of the Christopher Street synagogue. The next picture I have retained in my memory is the lowering of the coffin into the grave in the Nemirover section of "der awlter frai'en" in the George Washington Cemetery bordering on Ocean Parkway not far from Brighton Beach. As I have already related, there were two Nemirover "lawntsman" societies, "der awlter farai'en" and "der yeenger farai'en." The older and the younger societies. My grandmother Bahsyeh is interred in the cemetery of "der awlter farai'en."

My father, along with other younger immigrants, was a founder of "der yeenger farai'en" in 1905 or so. My grandfather, probably in his early sixties when he came to America from Argentina about 1906, preferred the more mature members of "dem awlten farai'en," founded in the 1880's, I have been told. During the week of "shiva" I overheard one of my aunts asking if my father would still be paid his wages though he was absent from the job. Apparently she did not yet understand his new position as a builder and partner in the enterprise. I do not remember what my father said, but I felt that even he wondered if he was entitled to his weekly salary as a working partner when he was not on the job.

Another new experience for me was my father's strict observance of Kaddish for his mother every day during the traditional year of mourning. He would leave the house very early in the morning and stop by a neighborhood synagogue, on Berriman Street near Glenmore Avenue, just down the block from P. S. 64 where I graduated in 1926, and also where, under the tutelage of the Shamas, whose name I no longer remember, I studied for the Bar Mitzvah and where I was called up to the Torah for the first time in my life in October of 1924. Here my father would recite the morning prayers and say kaddish for his mother. Then he would drive off in the Ford coupe sedan to Astoria and be on the job before anyone else. In the evening on his way home he would once again step into the same synagogue for minkha and ma'ariv and say kaddish again before coming home for supper.

On occasion, he would busy with business appointments in the afternoon away from the job. He would then stop by any convenient synagogue on the way home and say kaddish there. East New York and especially Brownsville must have had tens and even hundreds of synagogues with daily minyans, some as early as 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning so that one could attend to spiritual matters before rushing off to work to make a living. My father observed the same routine saying

kaddish daily during the year of mourning for my grandfather Yahnkel who died in 1930. The customs and traditions of the former life the Jewish villages, shteylekh, in Russia had not yet become attenuated, compromised or rationalized away as empty ritual. Spiritual needs were as essential as material needs, if not in substance, at least in form. Form can exist without substance. A shirt can be stuffed with straw, but as long as there is a shirt there is hope that it may one day also be stuffed with a heart. As long as we eat kneydlekh at the Peysakh seder, there will be a Peysakh even without the reading of the entire Haggadah word by word.

Chapter 15
My Father: Brief Days of Glory

During the decade of the 1920s my father's "star," so to speak, was in the ascendant. He was young and strong and ambitious. From the work of his own two hands he bought our first house and attained a more than a modest standard of living, much higher than most of our neighbors on Essex Street and higher than his or my mother's brothers and sisters.

Besides earning enough to live well from day to day, my mother and father had enough disposable income to buy a baby grand Knabe costing $1,200 dollars for my sister Esther, who was taking piano lessons. This was almost twice what the Ford automobile cost and one-fourth the price of the house we were living in. Every summer during school vacations, we spent the months of July and August at Brodsky's farm and boarding house in Ellenville, later in Mountaindale, in the Catskill Mountains. After Esther and I were in high school we were sent to summer camp.

By 1922 he had accumulated a small capital which put him on a 20% footing as working partner with Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky in the Astoria operation. The rest of the decade witnessed a continual rise in my father's fortunes. In 1926, when I entered Erasmus Hall High School, he was able to put down $10,000 on an $18,500 new one-family house located at 625 Empire Boulevard in the "President Street" section, Crown Heights, fulfilling my mother's dreams and aspirations. In 1927 he bought a Packard sedan which we used for pleasure and also a Buick coupe sedan which he used for transportation to the job. It was about this time that my mother, about thirty-seven years old, learned drive.

After the successful Astoria operation in 1924 or so, my father looked about for another parcel to build houses on speculation. Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky had begun an operation of about twenty one-family frame houses in a rather exclusive suburban commuter neighborhood, Flushing, Long Island. They had turned the lots, on a sort of consignment scheme, over to lawntsman of theirs, one Eedele Shnahder, Snyder in English. They held the title to the land until the houses were sold at which time they paid for the lots. In other words, they were more interested in selling the lots to builders on credit and so did not have to construct and sell the houses themselves in order to turn a profit.

Today Flushing is just one of the many densely packed middle class neighborhoods in the borough of Queens of the city of New York. It was the last stop on the Flushing Line of the IRT. Flushing, as well as Bayside, Little Neck, Great Neck, Douglaston, Oyster Bay and points further east in Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island, were served by the North Shore line of the Long Island Railroad.

Commuter trains left from Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan or from the Flatbush Avenue Station in Brooklyn, the latter requiring a change of trains in Jamaica.

The lots that the Kosanoffskys sold to Eedle Synder were located a couple of miles or so west of Main Street on the north side of Northern Boulevard on 28th Street, as it was then numbered. At some much later date all the streets of Flushing were given new numbers and incorporated into the street plan of the rest of the borough of Queens. It was a dead end street which ended at the Long Island Railroad tracks.

The Kosanoffsky operation on 28th Street was less than a success. Their lawntsman, Eedele Shnahder, as stipulated in the deal, built about twenty houses on that block. They also had lots for another twenty-four houses on 29th Street which they intended to make use of in the same fashion after the sale of the first twenty.

Eedele Synder, was a happy go-lucky-man, and also a carpenter, more in name than in fact. My father would tell the story of how he once installed "peteefenicks. " I never found out the original English version of this Russo-Yiddish word. Peteefeniks are installed in the space between beams or floor joists which is then filled cinders and wire mesh on which the bathroom floor tile is then laid. The "peteefenik" is made of strips of sheathing or other 1" x 6" or 1" by 4" lumber to fill the space between the floor beams and nailed to stringers in turn nailed to the beams. The space between beams is then filled with cinders held in place by the "peteefenik" on which the floor tile is laid. It could be that "peteefinik" is a Yiddish version of the English word "deafening," which in New Yorkese is pronounced "deefening," just as the word "deaf" is sounded as "deef."

Eedeleh was such an "expert carpenter" that he did not understand that the stringers and the strips had to be well nailed. He worked mainly by intuition, it would seem, and was less than compulsive about doing he job right. The builder came to inspect the job in the bathrooms where Eedeleh Snyder had installed "peteefeniks." When he stepped into the first bathroom to test the job, he fell through the floor, probably shouting bloody murder as he went down. So the story goes as my father related it.

After the experience with Eedleh Synder who abandoned the operation on 28th Street without bringing it to a close, the Kosanoffskys had to finish the job themselves. They then approached my father to take the lots on 29th on the same terms they had given Eedeleh, but also with the condition that he correct the problems created by Eedeleh.

They sold the lots to my father "on credit" so to speak. As each house was sold, the lot it was on was to be paid for, usually amounting to less than the buyer's down payment. The money due the Kosanoffskys also included an extra amount sufficient to pay for one additional lot. In other words, as each house was sold, the lot it was on plus another lot were released. My father was to be responsible for

obtaining the construction loans which would be converted to first mortgages assumed by the buyers over and above their down payments.

But the brother's Kosanoffskys added a non-financial condition to the deal. They suggested a "shidekh", marriage, a business partnership between my father and Pinyeh's brother-in-law, Abe Schneider. Abe was a carefree, untroubled young man at the time, twenty-two years old. His prime qualification for the partnership was that he would be the "shrahber", writer who could keep the books.

This was considered an important function considering that neither the Kosanoffskys nor my father had ever had any formal schooling except for the kheyder, Hebrew religious school. Therefore, the person who kept the books had to be someone who was absolutely trustworthy. In 1924 my father was all of thirty-eight years old, had been in America nineteen years and was more like Abe's uncle than his peer. It is amazing, indeed, that here were men who were illiterate by American standards, yet they could organize, finance and carry out building operations in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, despite the fact that they could not keep the books themselves or read the contracts they signed. Everything was committed to memory.

So Abe who was born in America, probably in 1902, and American educated, became my father's partner not only because he was Pinyeh Kosanoffsky's brother-in-law, but because he was a member of the family and could be trusted. Max's son Looyeh, perhaps only five or six years older than me and still in high school, did exactly that for his father and uncle who were among the biggest developers and builders in Brownsville and East New York in the 1910s. They went further afield out on Long Island in the 1920s.

At any rate, Abe and my father became partners on the Flushing job in 1924. Pinyeh may have felt my father would be a stabilizing influence on Abe. I doubt if Abe ever went to high school, but I do remember he had a very clear and legible handwriting. The style of his penmanship was that taught in the public schools of the city of New York, the Palmer Method, and one of the reasons that I never learned to write legibly.

In some ways Abe Schneider was a "voyler yeeng," a "regular guy," who reminds me of my deceased brother-in-law Freddy Koplowitz. Like Freddy, more than thirty years later, Abe drove a Hudson sedan. And like Freddy he drove very fast. And like Freddy he would jam on the brakes sliding to a stop with wheels locked as if they were sled runners. I remember on the Corona job, an operation that lasted from 1926 to about 1928, Abe would come up fast to the watchman's shanty, which also served as an office, coasting the last fifteen or so feet on the sand covered pavement.

I harbored a warm affection for Abe, almost as much as for my Uncle Benny. Like Benny, by the look in his eye, I knew he loved me. He had a proud look on his face when he heard I was awarded the "Haney Medal for Fine Craftsmanship" at my grade school graduation in January of 1926. He was a mild sort of rebel, if a rebel at all, not even a passionless dissenter. One Sunday morning when I came with my

father to the Corona job, he induced me to eat leavened bread for the first time in my life during the Passover holidays. Not just bread, but a sandwich of non-kosher Italian salami no less.

As I have already mentioned before, Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky were originally carpenters. They were from a shteytl in Podolia in the same region as Nemirov. They spoke with the same Yiddish as my father and mother. Abe's father, a lawntsman of the Kosanoffskys, also worked in the construction business. He used to deliver bricks and had a reputation of shorting on the number of bricks ordered. When asked to verify the count – how many thousands there were on horse-drawn wagon before unloading – he would hurriedly reply that he doesn't count his years, "Ikh tseyl zikh nit dee yooren," and then dump them in a pile before any estimate could be made of the bricks which had been neatly stacked on the wagon. Gossip had it in the trade, that he would skim off a couple of hundred bricks from each delivery and sell them on other jobs, so the story went.

Pinyeh was married to one of Abe's sisters who died leaving him with a young child, a daughter. He then married his deceased wife's younger sister with whom he had a number of children. Also, another sister of Abe, the eldest, was married to Sam Bawrenshteyn, Bernstein, also a developer and a builder. He was a very rich man whom Abe, for some reason known only to himself, gave $40,000 during the course of the Corona operation in 1927 and 1928. He used the blank checks which my father sometimes signed in advance so that Abe could pay the contractors and building supply people when he had to be away from the job.

So Abe and my father went in to the speculative building business on the Flushing operation constructing twenty-four one-family houses for sale. They got along very well. Abe, as was befitting for the younger of the two, was very respectful to my father. And he treated me more like a nephew of his own than his partner's son.

The operation in Flushing lasted about two years, 1924-1925 and was successful. All twenty-four houses were sold at a profit. My father used to go to the job seven days a week. On Sundays he would spend his time dealing with prospective buyers. In fact he sold all the houses himself without the intervention of real estate brokers. I loved to go to the job with him on Saturdays and Sundays and made friends with some of the boys in the neighborhood. I believe I already related something of the Flushing job in connection with my aunt Maryam's husband, Hershel Herman, who had been a "bawdner", cooper, barrel maker, in Nemirov and was left without a trade because of the Volstead Act, Prohibition.

None my friends in Flushing were Jewish boys. Unlike many of the gentile boys I knew in East New York and who were my classmates at P. S. 64, these boys were refined, spoke good English, were well mannered, and whose parents had an interest in their education just like Jewish parents, and a total surprise to me. One in particular was Herbert Haverfield. His parents were originally from Virginia. His

father, I believe, was in the shipping business, or at least had something to with ships.

I am certain that I was the first Jewish boy he had ever known in his life. We got along fine until one day we had an argument while playing in his yard. He said something deprecating about my being a Jew. I do not remember exactly what he said, nor did he say it with any detectable animus. He seemed to be mouthing a commonly used epithet he had heard somewhere and did not sound like he really meant it. I sensed that he was just "hitting below the belt" to get the better of me.

I had never had a fist fight in my life, but I felt that I had to do something about the insult. However, the truth is I did not feel insulted nor did I bear Herbert any rancor. I also suspected that Herbert was not one to hit back either. But as a Jew I felt I had to stand up for the Jewish people if not myself. So I struck him on the chest with my fist. I do not remember that any other blows were exchanged, a least I do not remember him hitting me back. We continued being friends till the job was finished and all the houses were sold. I lost track of him because I never went back to Flushing.

There was also a Mr. and Mrs. Thomas living in one of the houses on 28th Street where my father straightened out some of Eedele Snyder's deficiencies in construction. She asked me to do some small chores and then paid me for my work. This was the first time in my life that I had ever been paid for something I had would have done as a mark of respect. Thus, I was surprised that I what I had done merited remuneration in cash. I believe she gave me one dollar. I did not know exactly what to do with this money, so I bought a large harmonica. It was almost twice the size as the usual Hohner "Marine Band" harmonica which cost twenty-five or fifty cents at the time.

My parents did not believe in "allowances." My mother worked in a sweat shop when she came to America in 1903, just about thirteen years old at the time. Later on she worked as a seamstress in ladies' clothing factories till she married in 1909. She always gave her pay envelope unopened to her father each week which, along with my grandfather's pay, was used to support the family. When my father worked for his father in Nemirov, he had to make a stool or a taburet to sell in the market or, when he was older and stronger, to saw logs into boards by hand at five kopeks "a shnit", a cut, in order to get some spending money,.

The only spending money I ever got was the nickel each day before returning to school after lunch. I usually bought a frankfurter from the man with the frankfurter cart who usually stood on the corner the street near the school. My sister Esther would also buy a hot dog from the same man. I would finish mine first and then harass her for a bite of hers which she would eat very slowly so as to stretch out the pleasure. It never entered my head that those hot dogs were not kosher.

So the money Mrs. Thomas paid me was far and above what I usually got for pocket money. Yet, it did not turn my head thinking that my mother and father

should pay me for what I was asked to do around the house. In our home I was an equal partner in the first place and not an employee, not a stranger whom it was right and just to pay for services rendered.

Talmudical type of reasoning, I suppose. Jews did not pay their children for work done for the benefit of the family of which the child was a member. That is why my mother turned her pay envelope unopened to her father each week and did not feel exploited.

But after we moved to Empire Boulevard in 1926 and I entered Erasmus Hall High School, I kept badgering my mother and father to give me a weekly allowance instead of doling out the money for car fare and lunch each day before I left for school. At first, I bargained for the amount each day. We finally arrived at an agreement of one dollar each school day. Then, after much arguing and relentless pressure on my parents, I asked for a dollar a day allowance on weekends too. And finally, so that I would not have to be asking for my allowance each day, I requested that I be given a check for seven dollars once a week. Each week I would write a check for seven dollars and then ask my father to sign it. And each week he reminded me that his father never gave him an allowance.

I tried not to spend the dollar alloted for each day and saved as much as I could so that I would have enough money to go with my friend Eddy Kemp to a Saturday matinee at a Broadway theatre. It was during these high school days that I became an habitue of Eve Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre on 14th Street in Manhattan and saw some marvelous plays by Chekhov, Ibsen, Goldoni and others which I do not remember now. Balcony seats could be had for as little as $1.00 or even 55 cents. I also had money left over to buy books, mostly from Jules Pollock's book store on Kingston Avenue around the corner from Empire Boulevard where we lived. If you will look on the fly leaf of some of the books on the various bookshelves, you will see some of those I bought while I was in high school. I recall some in particular: *Ancient Gems in Modern Settings*, English translations of Greek Lyric poetry; also the poems of François Villon with illustrations by Alexander King (I may have the name wrong); Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*; as well as Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, are among those I remember while sitting here writing down this anecdotal history.

Getting back to the brief days of glory when my father was a developer and builder. After the Flushing job was completed, Abe and my father looked around for another "proposition." They negotiated the same sort of deal in the acquisition of the lots as they had in Flushing, that is they did not have to pay for the lots until the houses sold. They bought a tract of land in Corona, Long Island from a developer named Stuart Hirsch on which they built fifty brick four-family houses. The total operation including land and the houses amounted to about $500,000, this in 1926-1928.

My father had a knack for improvisation and seizing unforeseen opportunities. He always claimed, and truthfully so, that he built those fifty houses in Corona for the building loan/mortgages without needing to invest a nickel, of his own money. In other words, he built the houses so economically that he had more than enough left over from the construction loans to pay for the lots too.

He built those houses almost on a mass production method, a method I suppose that today would be called very exacting scheduling of the total operation. For example, he did not buy bricks for the job from local dealers. Instead, he arranged with the Empire Brick Company in Hudson, New York, a town just below Albany on the Hudson River, to buy bricks wholesale and at a discount in railroad freight-car loads. He used these newly manufactured bricks only on the exterior faces of the walls. For the backs and cores of the walls he utilized second-hand or used bricks. He bought these used bricks at less than half the price of new bricks. I do not know where he bought the second hand bricks, perhaps a from a wrecking company which also supplied him by the freight-car load. The mixed use of new and second hand bricks resulted in a very substantial saving in construction costs.

Then by pure serendipity, when excavating for the basements he found that the lots were underlain with a fine sharp sand, perfect for mortar. He hired a gang of day laborers who did nothing but screen sand extracted from the excavations for the cellars. He always had more than enough to mix with cement for mortar, sometimes for as many as twenty-five or more bricklayers working side by side to raise the walls. My father was proud of the fact he did not spend one nickel for sand to build those fifty brick houses.

I have very warm memories of the gang of laborers, two of whom I got to know very well. They were all from the area around Monreale, near Palermo, in Sicily. My father gave some of them very descriptive nicknames, never really learning what their actual names were in Italian.

One in particular, a young man Sammy Blandino, was a very hard and enthusiastic worker who admired my father and was very loyal to him. The other laborers often proudly said of him that he could eat a pound of macaroni, effetely called pasta today, at one sitting. He was a muscular young man who even came to the job on Sundays to do odd jobs. He was very ambitious to better himself in America. His aim in life was to earn enough money to buy a wagon and peddle fruit and vegetables in the streets of South Brooklyn and be in business for himself. But it as not an ordinary wagon he wanted. He wanted to bring one from Sicily, that is the beautifully and artistically decorated wagon and harness for the horse, the traditional Sicilian type. I do not, know if it was nostalgia for home that prompted Sammy Blandino to want to bring such a wagon and harness from Sicily, or whether it was purely to promote more sales of the fruit and vegetables. Probably both.

He was still single when he worked for my father in 1926-1928 in Corona. He did eventually go into the fruit and vegetable business and sent to Sicily for his bride.

He invited my father to his house and I went with him. I still recall with great zest the smell and taste of his wife's cooking. She had arrived only recently and did not speak a word of English at the time. I still savor the fresh tuna she served us, apparently prepared with olive oil, garlic, onions in abundance, the taste of which I still sense on my palate.

There was also another paisano whom my father dubbed "di bigga moostash," the big moustache, because he sported an enormous moustache. And still another man, very stocky, with a broad face and nose that hardly protruded who looked like he was scowling all the time. Him my father dubbed "di booldogeh," the bull dog, though in character he was not ferocious at all like a bull dog. He was less than handsome and just as hard a worker as the rest of the men. And like the rest of the laborers, was loyal and respectful to my father. My father never patronized the men, despite the descriptive nicknames he had given them. He always treated them with good humor.

But the laborer I remember most vividly and with affection was a cousin of Sammy Blandino whom my father dubbed in Anglicized-Russian-Yiddish, "kawzinyoo," that is "cousin." One day Sammy spoke to my father saying "Mai koozeeneh kahma fahmeh Eetalee joosteh naw...." His cousin had just arrived from Italy (actually Sicily) and needed a job. My father hired him and dubbed him "kawzinyoo," my father's version of Sammy's version of the word cousin.

Kawzinyoo and Sammy worked like demons. One day my father left them at a pit excavating sand. When he came back later in the day to see how they were progressing, he was astounded to see that they had dug down so deep that they could not reach the mouth of the pit by a single heave of the shovel. The sand could not be shoveled out directly from the bottom. When they got down beyond the range where they could throw the sand up and out, they enlarged the pit leaving a platform or broad step to one side and continued digging down. My father saw that the pit was two "stories" deep by the time he got there in the afternoon. And this all without the use of power tools, just hand shovels and good will.

Kawzinyoo's real name, I later found out, was Sarido Ciolini, and that back in Sicily he was probably a rich man and referred to by his neighbors and peers as Don Sarido. He would always tell me "Ina Monreale I gotta oondred feefty olio tree." In Monreale I have one hundred and fifty olive trees. He had been in the United States once before when he worked for my father in Corona. In fact, two of his sons were born in Louisiana where he once had worked in the cyprus forests and lumber mills when there were cyprus forests still standing in southern Louisiana probably before the World War, 1914 - 1918.

In 1932 or so, and long after my father was no longer a developer and builder and had fallen on really hard times, Kawzinyoo got in touch with my father and contracted him to build a house for his eldest son who had just married a widow. She was a few years older than the bridegroom and had four or five children of her own.

She also had been left some money after her husband's death, a strong factor in Kawzinyoo's decision to make a match for his son with her.

Kawzinyoo bought a piece of land in Lindenhurst, Long Island where my father put up a frame house for his son and his wife and her children. It was during the summer between my sophomore and junior year at Union College, and so I was home. I went to the job with my father and worked as a carpenter helper. My father would drive home every night. I stayed there camping out with Kwazinyoo and his son and eating macaroni every night.

I still remember how Kawzinyoo or his son prepared it on wood fire. A few cloves of garlic were first browned in olive oil to which was then added some fresh green peas which were then cooked for a while. When the peas were ready, fresh tomatoes, skinned and with seeds removed, were added as well as a can of tomato paste. Some water was added, also salt and pepper, and the whole allowed to simmer for about an hour or two. When we were ready to sit down around the fire and eat, they boiled up about a pound or more of macaroni, in diameter about the same size as "sewer pipe." When the macaroni was cooked properly, it was forked out on each of our plates and then garnished with the sauce. This was he nightly meal. And in the morning, bread and coffee. At midday, we ate bread and cheese, perhaps a bit of Italian salami too. But bread was the principal dish of the meal.

When I got back to college that Fall, I wrote a short story based on my experiences while building the house for Kawzinyoo's son. I believe it was published in the college literary magazine, *The Idol*. I invented a plot, which perhaps came true one day, I do not know. But there was the former widow, big with a child once again, with three or four kids running around the yard of the still unfinished house. Her oldest child was a girl of about fourteen or fifteen who should have been the young man's bride and not her mother. That was the gist of the plot. I will have to look for the story in the copy I have of *The Idol* somewhere on the bookshelves in the study of our house on Urban Avenue in Durham where I am presently writing this.

It was during the Corona operation, in February of 1926 when I was about to enter Erasmus Hall High School in Flatbush, that my father and mother bought the house at 625 Empire Boulevard, between Kingston and Albany Avenues, in Crown Heights, the neighborhood my mother had aspired to since moving to Brownsville in 1909 soon after she and my father were married. Crown Heights was an upper middle class Jewish neighborhood. Empire Boulevard was just about three blocks south of President street where very affluent Jewish families lived in large and luxurious mansions individually designed and built for the owners. Our house at 625 Empire Boulevard was one about twenty semi-detached two story brick one-family houses built by a speculative builder on the block. Across the street there were large and expensive two-family houses, and on three of the corners of the block on Albany and Kingston Avenues there were some high rent apartment houses. Not like President Street, but a rank or two just below.

While engaged in the Corona operation, my father and Abe also built about twenty or so one-family houses in Middle Village, a neighborhood in Queens. They also built two sixteen-family apartment houses. Times were very good and my father had enough disposable income to pay down $10,000 on the Empire Boulevard house without any strain at all. The price of the house, I remember cost $18,500. In 1994 dollars of today would be at least twenty times as much, say about $300,000. It was really an expensive house. The four-family houses they were building in Corona at the time were selling for about $10,000 each. Just before we moved to Crown Heights, our two-family house on Essex Street in East New York had sold for $9,000.

Abe also bought a house in the same development a few doors down, exactly the same as ours – four bedrooms, one and one-half baths tiled from floor to ceiling, also a kitchen with walls tiled from floor to ceiling, a finished basement with an extra kitchen and a shower bath, also a semi-detached house and with a double garage in the back yard. At the last moment just before taking title to his house, Abe changed his mind about buying a house because he was still a bachelor, all of about twenty-four years old and still living a home with his parents.

My father took a mortgage to cover the difference between the price and the down payment. It was a standing mortgage as was customary in those days before the Depression and the "New Deal." The principal was not paid off in monthly installments over the life of the mortgage, ten, twenty or even thirty years, as is the custom today, hence the term "standing." The total principal of the mortgage could be "called" after a stipulated period of time. It was usually renegotiated depending on the market value of the house at the time the mortgage was called. Only the interest, legally set at 6%, was due in one or two payments each year.

My father chose not to pay the total price of the house saying that it would be difficult to sell it one day if it did not have a mortgage making financing for the new buyer very difficult. Furthermore, he would always be able to handle an $8,500 mortgage, about $500 in interest per year. Also, he would not have to drain off an extra $8,500 from his operating capital. Little did he know, or anyone else for that matter, that the stock market would crash in October of 1929, that the building business, especially of private homes, would come to almost a complete standstill, as would general contracting too, and the interest of $500 a year plus $500 in city real estate taxes on the house would be absolutely beyond his means. He never, nor any one else in the world in which we lived, dreamed that an economic Depression would cause unheard of discontinuities in American life during the 1930s. It came to pass, that were it not for the creation of a federal agency to stave off wholesale foreclosures of private homes, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, instituted by President Roosevelt and the New Deal, that my father was able to refinance the house with a $10,000 mortgage in 1933 or so stave off losing it by foreclosure.

To all intents and purposes, in 1935 just about when I finished work on my master's degree at Columbia University, he did lose the house when he sold it for all

of $10,000, exactly the amount of the mortgage less about one year's amortization. This was a disaster resulting partly from my mother's desire for a better life and also to live in an absolutely Jewish environment. They could just as easily have had one of the houses my father built in Flushing in 1924-25 for just the mortgage and not have had to lay out any cash at all as a down payment. I would have loved to have moved to Flushing because I already had friends in the neighborhood, a number of other boys and girls besides Herbert Haverfield.

Flushing was a high class commuter town served by the Long Island Railroad. The houses my father built were frame one-family two-story houses surrounded by lawns and trees. Quite pastoral when compared to the row house we lived in on Essex Street in East New York. But had my mother agreed to move there, we would have been the only Jewish family in the whole neighborhood inhabited mostly by WASPS, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, who thought very highly of my father, especially those who lived on 28th Street in those defective houses built by Eedle Snyder which my father took great pains to repair and put to rights.

For some reason or other of which I am not aware, tensions arose between my father and Abe in their business relationship which led to a dissolution of the partnership in 1927/1928. Abe bought my father out, or should I say promised to pay him his share which he was prevented from doing because the creditors forced the Brod Developing Company into bankruptcy when they heard my father was no longer a partner. They had little or no confidence that Abe could run the operation with my father gone.

The houses in Corona were all selling, but my father suspected that something was amiss and that Abe was not open and forthright with him any longer. My father could never put his hand on what was wrong because he depended on Abe to keep the books and report how matters stood at any given moment. My father had trusted him without reserve and to the extent than he would sign batches of blank checks in advance so Abe could pay the bills when he was away, as was the case when we occasionally went off for the weekend to the country, usually the Catskill Mountains.

One day my father suspected something was amiss when he saw some cancelled checks amounting to $40,000 which had been made out to Abe's brother-in-law Sam Bawrenshteyn, Bernstein. My father was astonished because the company had never had any dealings of any kind with Sam Bernstein at all. When confronted with this fact, "What has Sam Bawrensteyn got to do with us that you paid him $40,000" my father asked Abe? Abe explained that at one time when they were short of cash, he borrowed the $40,000 as a temporary loan to tide them over for the time being. This was a lame excuse because they were building those houses with money to spare from the building loans as well as from the sale of those already completed. The sum of $40,000 in 1927 probably had the buying power of at least fifteen or twenty times today and equal to about three-quarters of a million dollars

today. In fact, the whole of the Corona operation including the land and construction of fifty four-family houses amounted to a total of about $500,000, that is a half a million dollars. The $40,000 which Abe stole and gave to Sam Bernstein amounted almost ten per cent of the total project.

Abe never explained exactly why and how Sam Bernstein became a creditor of the company. I suppose. now in retrospect, that Abe, who was about twenty=five years old at time had no concept of the value so much money. He turned out to be less than a responsible person and totally unqualified to handle business of that magnitude. I believe he had some liaisons with women and other high living and that he squandered the company's money a little bit at a time over the course of a year or two and so turned to his brother-in-law for a loan of $40,000 to replace what he had taken from the company. He had creamed off the operation to the tune of $40,000 probably using some of the blank checks my father would sign for him to pay bills. It never occurred to my father that Abe would be crooked. In fact, he really was not dishonest by nature, just an irresponsible young man with a flair for high living. My father became very disillusioned and upset to say the least, and decided to break up the partnership with Abe buying out his share.

There were still some minor details of construction to complete and also a few houses still to be sold. The creditors, mainly the contractors and the material suppliers met and insisted that my father continue to run the operation and finish up the job. But my father wanted to be done with the matter. He became a creditor himself when the Brod Developing Company was forced into bankruptcy. The company was taken over by the creditors who then refused to pay my father his share as agreed with Abe when they separated. My father became a creditor with a claim against those creditors who had taken over the company.

He decided to sue the company for what was due him and hired Meyer D. Siegel, a lawyer who lived on Union Street near Kingston Avenue. His office was downtown Brooklyn somewhere near Court Street. Siegel also turned out to be a crook. I still remember his patronizing attitude toward my father the night I accompanied him for a meeting with Siegel in his house on Union Street.

After much litigation, including an appeals trial, my father won the case. The court sent the money to Siegel, in his capacity as the lawyer of the plaintiff. Without so much as more than a cursory and patronizing explanation, he took the greater part of the money awarded my father who had no recourse other than to sue his own lawyer. My father was left with just $10,000, a small fraction of what he would have earned from the Corona operation had Abe not been a fool and crook.

There he was with a paltry $10,000 left from an enterprise that he had built up from scratch, so to speak, to a worth of at least a few hundred thousand dollars. He blamed this all on his bad judgement in trusting his partner who, had been stupid and less than honest besides. The creditors, who had little confidence in Abe's ability to run the company without my father, forced a flourishing business into bankruptcy

to protect their interests. One of the principal creditors, who eventually took over the management of the company, a painter contractor, I remember pleaded with my father to stay and finish up the operation, to no avail.

Now in retrospect, I now believe it was a bad decision which he was, nevertheless, forced to make. He was helpless in having no one to trust to handle the bookkeeping and other office management. Keeping accounts in a little notebook in his invented alphabet and arithmetic was viable and practical enough when he was working on a much smaller scale in general contracting. I was still too young, about fifteen years old, unlike Looyeh Kosanoffsky, to handle the books of such a complicated undertaking – dealing with sub-contractors, building material suppliers, mortgage company, commercial banks, payrolls for hourly wage workers, and sundry other details. That was why Pinyeh and Max Kosanoffsky had made the "shidekh," marriage, between my father, the practical man who knew construction, and Abe Schneider, the "shrahber," in 1924 on the Flushing job.

In a nostalgic sort of way I sometimes lament that I was not at least three or four years older when this debacle of the Brod Developing ensued. Had I been, I would have gone into the building business with my father and enjoyed the creative life which I recognized he and all the contractors were leading: beginning with an empty lot, a set of drawings on paper and piles lumber, brick, sand and cement, raw materials, they would fashion a dwelling for people to live their lives in.

I sometimes sat silently listening at the table where contractors would occasionally meet with my father either at home or in the shanty-office on the job to discuss problems as the job progressed. My father would lay out the work. I suppose this is now called scheduling. As I heard them talk, I was aware even then that the private lives of these building-trade men did not enter, even covertly, into their minds let alone the discussions. Their work was creative and even transcendental yet practical and a means of making a living at the same time. All of them, despite their differences in religion, national origin and education, shared a common ground and understood each other because of that common ground, building. Not unlike poets who create poetry from the raw words of language, builders create spaces from raw materials.

The men with whom my father dealt were as diverse as the waves of immigrants who settled America. Carpenters were mostly Russian Jews, although some framing carpenters were Lutheran Swedes and Norwegians; bricklayers and stone masons were all Catholic Italians; diggers of foundations were usually Catholic Poles or Orthodox Ukrainians; plasterers were also Catholic Italians; painters were almost all Jews either from Russia or Austria-Hungary. And all the above craftsmen had similarly been born in Europe and all spoke English with accents derived from the native languages.

Then there were also some contractors who were American-born, sons of recent European immigrants especially electricians and plumbers. There were others

whose forebears had come to America generations earlier, most of whom were WASPS (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) and were bank and mortgage company officers. Some were owners of lumber yards and building supply companies many of which had been founded by past generations.

It seemed to me then and it still does now, that these men shared the same sort of transcendental objectives as do dramatists and theatre people in general, or as do authors, teachers, physicians and artists whose work transcends the mundane details of daily existence lifting them far above the tedious routine of daily existence.