Chapter 16
My Father: Years of Declining Fortunes and Health

There he was, my father, with a total capital of $10,000, a fraction of what it was before his partner squandered away unknown sums of money probably running into the thousands, aside from the $40,000 my father discovered he had siphoned off to his brother-in-law Sam Bawrenshteyn. He looked around for a proposition to continue building on speculation and found a parcel of land on Country Life Road in Garden City, Long Island. There he undertook an operation to build all of four or five houses, quite a minor enterprise considering that he his most recent venture was the construction of fifty brick four-family houses in Corona.

Garden City was a very high-class commuter town where insurance company executives, bank officers and Wall Street stock brokers resided. Most had moved there from Brooklyn or Manhattan as their fortunes rose to the stage where they were able to undertake massive interest payments on home mortgages. A Garden City address was a cachet that signified wealth and upper class status. Instead of commuting to work by subway along with the indiscriminate hordes of people, they now commuted to work on the Long Island Railroad with a select cohort of affluent passengers who on Sundays went out to Westbury to watch polo matches, though not yet wealthy enough to own a string of ponies and play themselves.

Zoning laws in Garden City were designed to shield its citizens from such eyesores as stores, markets and other commercial buildings. These were all centered in nearby Hempstead, a town founded on Long Island during the eighteenth century. Those days when I went to the job with my father, we would have lunch at a bakery in Hempstead where he always ordered crumb buns. I still remember they were especially delicious.

In keeping with the "high tone" social quality of the town, the houses he undertook to build in Garden City, were not just run-of-the-mill middle class one-family houses like those he had built in Flushing where he used about four different plans but with some minor variations in the design of the exterior. Nor were the Garden City houses modest in size and price as those he built in Middle Village, Queens, Long Island. All were exactly the same except for a few minor exterior details. Nor were they such working-class homes as the brick four-family row houses he built in Corona. Each of the houses in Garden City operation was individually designed by an architect and different from the others. In fact, they were really mansions, sumptuous and expensive dwellings selling for about $18,000 to about $20,000.

In 1928 carpenters earned about $9 a day, clothing factory workers about $35 a week and were liable to periods of "slack" between "seasons." I have seen houses of this type here in Durham for sale at from $200,000 to $300,000.

Now in retrospect and with hindsight, I suppose it would have been better had he built more modest houses directed at less affluent buyers, if the zoning laws would have permitted. But the truth is, that after the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing severe economic depression when even apples in grocery stores rotted for want of buyers, it is not very likely that had he built the most modest of homes, they would have found a ready market.

I have already related something concerning the Garden City operation in the chapter dealing with my Aunt Libeh and her husband Louie and their children Bernie and Florence who came to live with us on Empire Boulevard on their return from Los Angeles, California. Louie worked for my father as "shrahber," bookkeeper, during the construction of the Garden City houses.

In past operations, it was not unusual for the houses to sell during construction. Only a few would still be left for sale after completion. Though the whole project amounted only to four of five homes, I do not remember the exact number, they remained unsold even after completion. Furthermore, after the October 1929 crash of the stock market, it was impossible to sell them even at cost. The stock brokers and insurance and bank executives, prospective buyers in 1928, had fallen on hard times after the "Crash."

The real estate market was in a decline even before in 1928 and early 1929. He had numbers of offers from buyers, "thousand dollar millionaires," as he dubbed them, whose pretensions to high class, expensive living were greater than their resources. They did not have enough cash for the down payment, that is the difference between the selling price and the first mortgage.

But my father had to hold on to the houses because he had invested his last $10,000 in the project. In a sense, he had drawn that money out during construction to support two families at the same time, $100 a week for himself and $35 a week for Louie. He wanted desperately to sell the houses even at a minimum above the mortgages and, at least, recoup his initial cash investment. He was resigned to the reality of having run the operation just for the wages of the $100 a week he had paid himself.

I remember him saying that it was costing him more than $300 a month just for the interest on the mortgages. Multiply that number by about 15 or 20 to gain an idea of what this amounts to in 1994 dollars. Carpenters today earn as much and more in a hour than they did for a whole day in 1928/1929. Finally, in desperation, short of money to pay the interest on the mortgages, he went into the bank, I believe it was on Main Street in Hempstead, and signed the deeds over to the bank and went away empty-handed.

The Garden City operation was the last my father undertook as a builder/developer, except for one special project he had in partnership with Joe Randazzo, a brick mason contractor whom he had known for years. Joe Randazzo had done the brickwork on the Corona job, if I remember correctly. Joe was a hot-blooded Sicilian who spoke very little English but who had a talent for organizing and carrying out large projects. I think he also had as a partner a paisano Marty Mirabel, who was about my father's age and with whom he did business on various occasions later on, many years later. They were also friends on a personal level. Joe Randazzo did the brickwork on the Premier Theatre on Sutter Avenue on the corner of Hinsdale Street just a block away from where my maternal grandparents lived. My sister Esther and I often went to the Premier to see a movie and vaudeville show Sunday afternoons.

Joe lived in a one family house on Fountain Avenue about ten blocks east of Essex Street where we lived from 1917 to 1926. Some other paisanos of his also had their houses adjacent to his. Some were interesting characters and expert brick masons. One in particular, whose name I no longer remember, surreptitiously connected the furnace of his house heating system to the main gas line in the street. For years and years he heated his house without paying a cent to the gas company until someone, probably one of his neighbors whom he may have offended, informed on him. He was prosecuted, found guilty and had to spend a few years in jail.

Joe Randazzo first marriage was to a woman from Italy, very likely from his native town. She died and left him with some small children. I remember only one, a young unmarried daughter. He married again, but this time an American woman, said to have been of German ancestry, who spoke no Italian, let alone the Sicilian-Italian dialect. To marry out of the "tribe," that is to marry someone not from one's native town, was rare indeed and to marry a non-Italian was unheard of among most immigrant Italians.

But Joe Randazzo was a an unusual man. His paisanos addressed him most respectfully as "maistro," because he was a master craftsman. In fact, I believe the paisano who went to jail for stealing gas to heat his house was very also addressed with respect and even affectionately as "maistro Bep", Master Giuseppe, Bep' being the Sicilian sounding version of the nickname for Giuseppe.

The letter "P" in Sicilian, as in Arabic, is sounded like the letter "B." Peppe become Beppe, or Bep' in Sicilian, Palestina becomes Balestina. I have heard Guatemala-born children of Lebanese immigrants pun on the Spanish words "pesos" and "besos," pesos, money, and kisses. It is interesting that Sicilians, who were once dominated by Arab conquerors, have retained the same pronunciation.

My father had a very high opinion of the crew that worked with Joe Randazzo. Walls flew up so to speak and the bricklayer helpers or laborers had to step lively mixing mortar and carrying and bricks to the men on the scaffolds who were always shouting for more mortar and more bricks. I still remember the cries of the men in

white overalls on the scaffolding raising the walls of the houses on the Corona job. At that time my ear was not attuned to their vocalizations, and so I do not recall the exact words they used for mortar and bricks.

Curiously enough, despite the lack of a common language, Joe worked mainly for Jewish builders. He also had a good reputation with the one wholly Jewish bank in Brownsville Brooklyn, the Bank of the United States which had merged with the Myoon-i-Sipel Beynk, Municipal Bank. The tenement house where I was born in 1911, on Stone Avenue near Pitkin Avenue, was demolished to make way for the MyooniSipl Beynk. During the Depression, when I was a freshman in college in 1930, the Bank of the United Sates went bankrupt. Because of its name, many people thought that it was a government bank. My parents had a little money on deposit there which I remember was paid back at the rate of ten cents on the dollar after many years of litigation.

At any rate, Joe's reputation was such in the trade that the Bank of the United State turned to him to finish construction of the four or six, I do not remember exactly how many, sixteen-family apartment houses in Bayside, a town just East of Flushing on Long Island, now in the New York borough of Queens. The original builder of the project was Eedleh Snyder. He was in over his head, so to speak. He was having all sorts of trouble, mostly due to bad management of both construction and finances. He found he could no longer cope with the project, though he had already completed two of the apartment houses. When he ran out of the money which the bank had advanced him by way of a construction loan and had no capital of his own to finish the job, he abandoned the project leaving the bank with two buildings already standing and the other two (or was it four?) still in the middle of construction. The Bank had no other recourse but to foreclose the whole project in order to salvage its investment in the construction loans and first mortgages advanced to Eedle Snyder, and complete the buildings still in the middle of construction. The bank called in Joe Randazzo and gave him a construction loan, in addition to the one already encumbering the project, to finish the project and take over the responsibility of the first mortgages on the completed buildings.

But Joe was a boss bricklayer and could not handle the job himself. His experience and know-how was primarily with brickwork and masonry. He did not know exactly how the other trades functioned in the construction of a building. The bricklayer erects the walls and then leaves the job never seeing a plumber or a carpenter or an electrician working on the skeleton building he erected.

Joe Randazzo, with this unexpected opportunity in his pocket, so to speak, needed a man like my father to do the job, and so he took him in as partner. My father's task was too superintend the construction of the buildings still to be completed and manage the whole operation including the houses already standing.

Neither of them had to put up any cash for the job. It was turned over to them for them to finish and to be responsible for the management of the buildings

already completed including making payments on the mortgages, paying the real estate taxes, the maintenance of the buildings, and most important of all, the collection of the rents from the tenants already living in the completed buildings. The whole project belonged to them. They could sell the apartment houses or keep them as investment. However, most important from the bank's point of view, was that Joe and my father were to complete the project and make payments on the construction loans which were to be converted to first mortgages on completion of the buildings.

My father did bring the unfinished buildings to completion. At the same time, he also managed the buildings that were already occupied and collected the rents. I am afraid that he did not keep accurate records of what sums he collected. He had no bookkeeper on the job and kept accounts in his own little notebook kept in the breast pocket of his jacket. And Joe, was the same sort of bookkeeper as my father. His daughter, I believe she may have been in her early twenties then, kept the books. But the cash flow each month from rents flowed through my father's pockets first.

I do not know what happened, but one day when I came home from school. there was Joe Randazzo sitting at the breakfast room table waiting for my father. My mother was really worried and even frightened because Joe had a fiery temper. Even more frightening was the fact that Joe always carried a revolver stuck in belt. I was also disturbed seeing Joe sitting there, not saying much. He was a man of few words, at least with my father, probably because the only conversations they had, and those which I sometimes overheard, were always about construction matters, the common ground which bonded the Sicilian bricklayer and the Russian-Jewish carpenter. When my father came home, he talked matters over with Joe. I do not remember exactly what transpired between them. Both my mother and I were relieved that Joe did not shoot my father with the gun we saw sticking out of his belt around his ample stomach.

After the interlude in Bayside, my father returned to general contracting. At first, he was able to make a decent living and maintain the standard of living he had achieved while a builder. But the Depression was afflicting the country and few if any businessmen had any plans for expanding facilities. Nor did private people plan to improve their dwellings and bring them up to date. In 1930, the year I entered Union College, he still was moderately busy with some large general contract jobs and able to take care of my college costs without too much difficulty. During the first semester of my freshman year, the fall of 1930, he and my mother went to Newport, New Hampshire to see if they if it were feasible to settle there.

My father had an old friend, Fred De Houst, whom he had known since the days in Essex Street when he had the carpentry labor contract on the houses Max and Pinyeh Kosanoffsky built in Cyprus Hills in 1916/1917. Fred De Houst owned a bonded warehouse on the waterfront in Brooklyn in partnership with a man who was originally from Newport, Hampshire. I really regret I have forgotten this man's name. He arranged for my father to meet his family in Newport, either a brother or

his father, I do not recall which, who owned and published the local newspaper. It may have been a weekly, I am not sure, for which he wrote a column called "Random Observations." In my senior year at Union College I wrote a column for the college newspaper, *The Concordiensis*, once a week with my personal views and observations including whatever came. Remembering the column from the New port paper, I also called my column *Random Observations*.

I have copies of the college newspaper with my column here in my study on the book shelves. They are bound in an extra large blue buckram cover. Not long after I graduated in 1934, my uncle Izzie Weinger, my aunt Ida's husband, bound them for me along with copies of the college literary magazine, *The Idol*, where some of my writings were published, in the shop where he worked for Widder Brothers in New York. I have already written about him in the chapter on my mother's siblings.

In the Fall of 1930, in my freshman year, my mother and father came by to see me in Schenectady on their way driving to New Hampshire. I was living in the Kappa Nu fraternity house as a "pledge" at the time. (I dropped out of this fraternity and went to live in a dormitory where I joined Zeta Beta Tau). The reason for them taking that trip was that Fred De Houst's partner told my father that there was a small lumber yard and house for sale in Newport which he thought would be a good investment and where my father would do well, especially since he would have the backing of his family and the editor of the newspaper.

My father came away very enthusiastic about the town and the people. My mother was impressed with civility and culture of the newspaper editor and his family. He reminded her of the cultured and refined high class landed Russian gentry back in Nemirov for whose womenfolk my grandfather Shaiyeh sewed clothes, especially riding habits. The editor himself, my mother was amazed to see, wore a short beard and was well versed in the Hebrew Bible and even read Hebrew. I never really found out why they did not move to New Hampshire.

I know my mother was less than adventuresome and could not abide the thought of leaving the high-class Jewish neighborhood of Crown Heights for which she had strived all the days of her life. She enjoyed living in our house on Empire Boulevard and could not visualize herself living in a town where we would be the only Jewish family. Though she did appreciate the fact that if we moved, as the editor assured her, I would be able to enter Dartmouth College not too far from Newport. This seemed attractive to me because Dartmouth was one of the schools I wanted to attend, but my application was turned down.

So nothing came of this and my father and mother went back to the life they knew in Brooklyn. Materially, with regard to achieving some financial security, this turned out to be tragic choice which led to suffering, a sense of failure, humiliation and privation exacerbated in the end by the loss of their health.

By 1932 matters had taken a turn for the worse. It was an exceedingly difficult struggle and to keep me in college. If I had left school, it was most unlikely

that I would ever have found a job at all. At least, in school I was not idle and spared wandering around from employment agency to employment agency looking for a job, any sort of job. So it turned out that it was just as well that I remained in school where I was helped with student loans for tuition. But the cost of paying for room and board was another matter.

My mother and father depended entirely on the construction jobs my father found from time to time and after long periods of fallow with no income at all. It is a miracle, or rather an example of their unflinching fortitude and tenacity of purpose, a stiff-necked stubborn unwillingness to accept reality, that my parents, especially my mother, saw me through to graduation from Union College in June of 1934.

Times got so bad in 1932 that father decided to go to Los Angeles. He heard times were a little better and that he might possibly find some construction work or even a salaried job in the movie studios. Before he left he made a special trip to Schenectady, where I was in my sophomore year at Union College, to see me and say goodby. In those days California was perceived as being very far away, as far away as America was from Russia for the immigrants at the beginning of this century.

Families would gather at Grand Central Station in New York to bid farewell to those departing for California, all with heavy hearts knowing full well that this was probably the last time they would ever see them again. It was a five- or six-day journey by train from New York to Los Angeles. Most people who went to California, did so in hope of finding a better situation than they had in New York where the Depression was deeper and hopelessness for the futures was the pervading viewpoint. Few could afford the luxury of a berth on a Pullman sleeping car or for meals in the dinning car.

But my father did not gravel to California by train. He drove there with Eeedleh Snyder who provided his automobile for the trip in which they shared expenses. This was before interstates, four-lane divided highways and by-passes around towns and cities. My father related how they made the journey, without maps apparently, just by asking directions from town to town. On the trip my father learned about pancakes of which he became fond because they were served with honey, probably maple syrup.

He recalled, with some amusement and even embarrassment, the day or so they spent a day in Knoxville, Tennessee. They were invited to some function in the local Jewish Center where some entertainment program was being given by local talent. To my father's embarrassment and mortification, "Eedle Shnahder, der mesheegener," the lunatic, got up to show he also had talent and sang some Yiddish songs.

Once in Los Angeles, my father was taken in as a guest in Vera Gordon's house, where she and her husband Nahum were extremely kind and helpful to him. Vera Gordon was the older sister of my Uncle Louie, my aunt Libeh's husband, who had worked for my father as bookkeeper on the Garden City job. Vera Gordon was

an actress, at first on the Yiddish stage in Russia, Ekaterinaslav in the Ukraine, later in New York and finally in the movies in Los Angeles. I still remember the silent movie, "Humoresque," in which she played the part of the mother. The piano player who accompanied the screening of the film, played Dvorak's "Humoresque" over and over again, especially during the schmaltzy parts when Vera Gordon was weeping and gesticulating because of some drastic situation in the plot.

She and her family occasionally visited us on Empire Boulevard. My mother who loved the theatre and admired actors, would make special dinners when she came to visit us. We sometimes also visited her. She lived in an apartment house in a high class neighborhood in Brooklyn, its name escapes me now. Later she moved to Riverside Drive in New York when it was in the same category as Park Avenue today. She had two children, Willy and a daughter Nadya.,

My father remained in Vera Gordon's house in Los Angeles for about two months or so, perhaps longer, I do not remember. At first he tried to find work in construction, but to his dismay he found that the building business was more moribund in Los Angeles than back in Brooklyn and Long Island. At the suggestion of Vera and Nahum Gordon who had some entry in the movie studios, he tried to find some employment there. He kept going to the various studios looking for work in the construction of sets for movie productions. Each time, he was told to come back later because at that moment they were not in production or some such lame excuse.

Finally, coming to the conclusion that Hollywood was just an illusion, he turned around and came home. Eddleh Snyder who had no connections at all in Los Angles, left not long after they had first arrived. He too found nothing at all in the construction business and did not waste his time canvassing the movie studios.

The house in Empire Boulevard became more and more of burden impossible to bear. The standing mortgage $8,500 with interest payment of 6% per annum or about $500 and an equal amount for city real estate taxes, approximately $1,000 a year, was more than my father could handle. $1,000 then would be equal in buying powers from $10,000 to $15,000 today. He struggled year after year to hold on to the house, sometimes not having enough cash to buy coal to heat it during the winter. But my mother was indomitable and would not give up. After my sister Esther married in 1934 and I, after graduation from Union College, entered Columbia University graduate school to study for the Master of Arts degree, she resorted to renting the largest bedroom in the house, hers and my father's, for all of $25 a month to cover some of the costs of holding on to the place.

They would have lost the house before then had it not been for the HOLC, Home Owners Loan Corporation, a federal agency created during Roosevelt's New Deal that bought up the mortgages on homes in danger of foreclosure which were then refinanced. The principal of HOLC mortgages was amortized in monthly payments along with the current interest. The Empire Boulevard house was

refinanced with a $10,000 loan just about the time I was in my sophomore or junior year at college, probably in 1932 or 1933.

The new mortgage arrangement gave my father and mother a brief respite. Their economic situation did not become better. As a matter of fact, it actually worsened. Even jobs of the most insignificant sort, small repair jobs and the like, were almost impossible to find. Times were really very bad for my mother and father and I could do nothing to help. I had never worked for wages and had been sheltered all my life and totally without any skills to find any work other than teaching.

I do not exactly remember when I started looking for a teaching job on the high school level, probably before I finished work on the masters degree in 1935. I went around to many teacher's placement agencies looking for any appointment in high school. I was not qualified for a job with the New York City school system because I had not taken any "education courses." However, I was well qualified to teach in private schools which had little truck with that sort of training -- how to teach regardless of whether one had any knowledge of the subject.

I remember an incident at one teacher's agency where I applied. The woman, the owner of the agency, who interviewed me, said she was favorably impressed with my educational qualifications as well as my personality. She also assured me that she could probably place me in a school. Thereupon, she had me go to the outer office to fill out the application blank, which I duly complied with also entering the word "Jewish" in the blank reserved for religion. I handed the form to the secretary who took it in to her. Within a moment or two, she came out and very politely and firmly said that I would hear from her at a later date if something came up that fitted my qualifications.

I deduced immediately the cause of her change in attitude to me was the blank space filled in with the word "Jewish." I was sorry that I would not get the job she had said was open and that she would probably refer me to. I was not upset at all nor felt humiliated, let alone bemoaning that it was not fair. I accepted this sort of treatment as normal and really had no wish to be "accepted" or "tolerated."

I once realized the full implication of the word "tolerance" when I was in Marseilles in 1939 on my way to Greece. I asked the concierge in the hotel how to find my way to a certain neighborhood near the Vieux Port. He warmed me not to go there because it was the "quartier du tolerance." When asked what that meant the "quarter of tolerance," he quietly said "C'est la quartier de la prostitution." The red-light district. It seemed to me then that one tolerated evil, and it continues to mean the same to me till this day.

So when the owner of the teacher's agency politely ushered me out of her office, I was as resigned as a merchant who does not make the sale because the buyer offered too little. The goods, my amor propio, was worth more than what was offered. I did not want to let the incident go without some response. When I got home I wrote her a letter in which I included a phrase of which I still remember, something

I must have picked up from a play of Shakespeare and probably quoted in the style of Mrs. Malaprop, "Just as the Ethiopian cannot change his skin nor the leopard his spots, I cannot change what I am." Though I did not say so, "Nor do I wish to be someone else, and I am quite content to be what I am."

At any rate, she got in touch with me and asked to come and see her. When I returned to her office, almost apologetically, she told me that she had never been able to place a Jew in all the years she had been in the teachers' employment business. She did apologize for having so abruptly ushered me out of her office, the reason being that in the past some of the Jewish candidates for jobs, especially women, would break down and cry and be very upset. She did not want risking something of the same sort of behavior had she forthrightly told me that she was unable to place Jews in teaching positions in private schools. This story is, an "apologia" in the Socratic sense, of the reason why I did not get a job and help out at home instead of going to graduate school and continued to be a burden to my parents.

By 1935 when I had completed the requirements for the master's degree, I was fortunate enough to find a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps as an "educational adviser," my father had to give up the house because he was already deeply in arrears on the monthly payments and was in danger that the HOLC would ultimately foreclose the house. The salary I was to earn in the CCC, $167 a month, was not enough to cover the mortgage payments and still have enough left to live on.

My father and mother very reluctantly came to conclusion that they had to sell the house, if a buyer could be found. Not an easy task during the depths of the Depression in 1935. My father decided that the only way he might find a buyer was to go to the "corner" and let it be known that he had a house that was just right for someone with marriageable daughters.

I believe I related something about "the corner" previously, the northwest corner of Pitkin and Stone Avenue in Brownsville where it was traditional for Jewish carpenters and other building trade craftsmen to meet Sunday mornings. Later on, in the 1930s, real estate deals were also made on the corner. It was on "the corner" that my father found a broker who, within a short while found a customer with three or so daughters to marry to buy the house.

I accompanied my mother and father to the closing in a lawyer's office in Manhattan. I am touched even today, and prone to tears, when I think of the scene. My mother and father signing the contract and the deed to the house, which sold for $10,000, exactly the principal of the HOLC mortgage. The original down payment of $10,000 was lost. Then the three of us without a penny from the sale of the house and, worse still, without a home.

But God is a Father as my father would say when all looked black and without hope. Within a very short time, before we had to vacate the house on Empire Boulevard, my father drove out to Long Island and by pure luck found a group of

recently-built one family houses, one of which was still for sale. It was located off Hempstead Turnpike, just four miles east of Hempstead, in a village called East Meadow. To his surprise, the developer was a Mr. Bailey, who had moved there from Crown Heights, our neighborhood too, and whose daughter Felice had been a great friend of my sister Esther during their high school days. Mr Bailey was an old-time builder, but he too was having a hard time during the Depression, He built those six houses or so which sold very slowly, so took one for himself. The one opposite his house was still for sale and could be bought for just $500 down above the $4,000 first mortgage. Without hesitation, my father bought the house and so was once again a home owner.

It was a very nice house, not quite as large as the one on Empire Boulevard. But it had a more modern up-to-date kitchen, a full basement, a quarter of an acre corner lot and was surrounded by open fields and woods in the near distance. Really a beautiful setting and much nicer than the semi-detached house on 25 foot wide lot on Empire Boulevard in Brooklyn.

But my mother was very unhappy there, not so much because of the quality of the house as the quality of her life after we moved there. Isolation. When my father would leave in the morning, she was left alone all day. She was confined to house with nowhere to go, even for a stroll on the short dead end street off the busy traffic of Hempstead Turnpike. One needed an automobile to shop for even the barest necessities because there was no grocery store within walking distance where one could buy a loaf of bread. It required driving to Hempstead instead of stepping out to the bakery just around the corner on Kingston Avenue as had been the case when we lived on Empire Boulevard.

And my father was no help at all. He would wear out cars faster than he wore out his shoes so that they were sometimes left without transportation except for a bus that came by on Hempstead Turnpike once an hour. The bus terminal was in Hempstead just four miles distant. But the bus traveled there by an annoyingly circuitous route through the village of East Meadow and beyond picking up passengers before depositing them all at long last at the Long Island Railroad station.

My parents never bothered reading the Long Island Railroad time table. They resisted the regimentation of train schedules and so suffered many hours of needless waiting at the station for the East Meadow bus as well as another forty-five minutes or so of travel to the house on Bailey Avenue. By automobile the trip took less than fifteen minutes. In Russia, in their youth, it was standard practice to arrive at the train station in the morning and wait, frequently all day and into the night, for the train to Odessa or Vinitza or some other place to arrive at all regardless of the hour printed in the time table which nobody read anyhow. Published train schedules or time tables in Russia were the type of literature presently catalogued in libraries under the rubric of "fiction."

My parents lived in East Meadow for about two or three years before moving back to Brooklyn, to a two-and-one-half room apartment on Fenimore Street. After a year or so they again moved, this time to Schenectady to be near my sister Esther. My father hoped that he might be able to find some general contracting work there. Unfortunately, it was a vain hope. And so, after a few months they moved once again back to Brooklyn, this time to Saint John's Place, still a moderately upper class neighborhood near Grand Army Plaza, Prospect Park, the Brooklyn Public Library, the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.

This was in 1940 and at last my mother was content in a very old-fashioned one bedroom apartment, content because she could sit on the benches in Park Place, go to the botanical gardens or the library or the museum without any more effort than simply crossing the street. Also, around the corner was Union Temple, a Reform Jewish congregation, with a renowned rabbi whose sermons both she and my father enjoyed. And so they lived there satisfied for almost twenty years. It was in Saint Johns Place that my mother died January 1, 1960.

But my father was never happy living in a rented apartment. I still remember his constant refrain, "I was born in my own house and I want to die in my own house," He died sick of heart and crippled in body; but even worse, he died a disappointed man in a two-and-one-half room apartment on Gregson Street here in Durham, January 17, 1963 instead of his own home.

But even worse than his fate of never recouping economically and never again owning his own house, he also lost his health and never recouped it either. He was stricken with arthritis in 1942 not long after I went to teach at the university in Panama. There I remained until the end of the war returning home in 1947 a married man with one child, Sarah Dinah, and Malvina pregnant with Alexander Jacob.

Besides sending them just about enough to pay the rent on the apartment in Saint Johns Place, during the first year I was in Panama, I was also able to save some money with which I wished to buy a property back home, preferably a farm. I wrote my father about this plan of mine with which he enthusiastically agreed. He went up the Hudson Valley searching for such a place. He found a fourteen-acre farm on the banks of the Hudson River near Germantown. It had a sizeable number of apple and quince trees as well as coops with a capacity for a large number of chickens. I do not remember the exact number, but it was well over a thousand. The farmhouse was built into the side of a hill, so the living room was on a lower level down the hill and the bedrooms higher up the hill. The land was bordered by the New York Central Railroad tracks right on the banks of the Hudson River.

I reasoned with my father that instead of giving the money I sent them to the landlord as rent, they could be paying off the mortgage on the farm. I do not remember what the price of the place was, but it was under $5,000, and I would have had enough to keep up the mortgage payments from the salary I was earning at the University of Panama. But buying that farm would have necessitated my mother and

father to leave Saint Johns Place and move to Germantown on the Hudson. There my father would try to make a new start as a general contractor.

In 1942 while these negotiations were going on, he was just about fifty-six years and still vigorous. I also planned that when the war was over I would leave Panama because I did not wish to live out my life there though I had a permanent position at the university, and join them on the farm.

Man proposes, but God disposes. Before negotiations progressed to the point of closing the deal, the whole idea had to aborted for he fell ill with severe arthritis. My mother, who was against the whole idea from the first, and was supported in this by my sister Esther, said that he came back from one of the trips to Germantown in very sorry and sick condition. The matter ended.

Without further ado, the money I had saved and intended as a down payment on the farm in Germantown had to be used to send my father to Tucson, Arizona, for relief and a possible cure. And with this unfortunate bad turn in his health, he forever lost the chance of ever recouping his losses and making a living again. He did do some contracting again on one or two occasions for his brother-in-law Max Bauer, the baker. And once again in 1952, when he came to Durham to direct and oversee the construction of the house where I now sit and write this. He built this house with his eyes sitting on a empty nail keg with his cane in his hand shouting instructions to the carpenters and gesticulating and pointing with his cane.

The rest of my father's story you all know from your own experiences with him. After my mother's death in 1960 he remained in Saint Johns Place for a very short while. Then Esther found him an apartment on the Lower East Side on Second Avenue where he was less than happy to have returned to this area of New York which he left in 1909 for a better life in Brownsville, Brooklyn. At least he was conveniently located for Esther who lived at that time on West 98th Street near Central Park West and certainly nearer than Saint Johns Place in Brooklyn.

The Lower East Side was not for him. He came to Durham where he had a tiny apartment on Gregson Street. There he died in January of 1963 and was buried next to my mother in the cemetery belonging to the Community Synagogue of Rye, New York located in Westchester county in Valhalla, New York.

I shall always regret the harsh fate meted out to my mother and father, who did what tradition required of them without being aware that they were doing anything other than what was right. And I am not consoled that what I did for them was that which was required of me. I shall always feel a deep disappointment that I was not able to defend them against their loss of the place they had achieved in the world. I never earned enough to shield them from what they considered humiliation, to receive rather than give. They never asked me for anything.

After I went to work in the CCC camps in 1935, then in 1941 as a professor in Panama and in 1947 at Duke University, I sent them hardly enough to pay their rent, let alone enough to cover all their needs. The frustrating irony is that the

pittance I sent them was a sizeable portion of my total salary. When you were small children here in Durham, you and Mama, in a very direct sense participated with me in fulfilling my filial obligations, a sacrifice for you yet of little help for them.

So, thus ends the tale of my father. For me it was anything but "... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Chapter 17
My Mother: Perceptions

I have chosen to write about my mother's life last because her life encapsulates the story of my own, especially during the years of my childhood and even beyond when I was a grown man. It was a relatively simple and straightforward task to recount the details of my father's life because so much of it was the story of his life as a carpenter, general contractor and builder. Also, my ties to my father were direct with no unspoken agenda or purposes on his part for me to ferret out and respond to.

My father had no hidden alter ego or undisclosed facets of character which I had to understand tacitly and take into account. Usually, he said what he meant. Nor was he prone to dramatize situations with flights of unrealistic fancy. And so, I never was in doubt as to what he expected of me. He stepped aside allowing my mother to set the rules of behavior for me and my sister Esther. He also deferred to her in matters pertinent to our upbringing and education.

My father accepted life as a given and did what tradition required of him. The natural order of life was never a subject of metaphysical questioning on his part. The goal and object life was living. His goals and ambitions were to advance to a better life, "to make improvements," as he was wont to say when a house was run down and needed repairs and alterations to make it "up-to-date," habitable for use today, and not as it was yesterday for reasons of nostalgia. I inherited his point of view. I made a living from studying the past, but I did not, and still do not, wish to live in the past. I visit museums, but do not want to live in one. I always agreed with my mother who used to say, "Edison lost nights of sleep to invent the electric light bulb, and now in fancy restaurants they feed you by candlelight."

My mother viewed life differently from my father, from a more transcendental point of view, not cut and dried as he saw it, so to speak, but as something far beyond than merely coping with the mundane necessities of daily life. In some ways she was like a character in a Chekhov play. Unlike my father who viewed life more pragmatically, she rarely said what she really meant, rather she said what she hoped. The words she uttered had to be translated into the language of her feelings and her vision of what life should be like rather than what it actually is. She always idealized reality. in the Platonic sense. My father was often exasperated by my mother's myopic view of the many problems that faced them, especially when times became very difficult and she offered highly impractical solutions. He would say, "Es shtelt zikh eer fawr dee fahntahzyeh." She is imagining a fantasy, or she is fantasizing.

It was not enough to do what tradition demanded of one, but one also had to seek goals far beyond those of earning a living. The accumulation of wealth was not an end in itself. If it was one's Destiny to be fortunate to accumulate wealth, then

one could enjoy the freedom of making choices far beyond material possessions bought with money. Money was not for hoarding, money was for spending; but spending not just for the sake of spending or casual gratifications of the moment, rather spending to achieve a full and rich life of the spirit.

Though she never put it this way, or even articulated the idea in some other form, she exemplified the conviction expressed in the Hebrew aphorism, "Eyn lekhem, eyn Torah; loy lkekem, loy Torah." With bread there is learning (Torah); without bread there is no learning (Torah).

So it was for both my mother and father. They came to America to achieve the good life. The most compelling reason, but not the only one, for emigrating to America, was economic. Economic betterment to achieve a more cultivated and broader life style than possible in Russia, even in the best of circumstances. America was the land of "improvements," the land where one had little if any attachment to the past other than to change from the old ways, to "improve" the house by discarding the old coal stove in the kitchen and install a new gas range. To improve one's life by freeing oneself from the drudgery of having to haul coal up from the coal bin in the cellar to get the stove fired up before cooking supper each night. America freed one from the shackles of the "unimproved" Russian past. Also in America one was freed from the repressive liabilities and circumscribing social restrictions with which the Jews of Russia were burdened. The only way out for a better life both for the body and the soul, both materially and spiritually, was to go to America.

How else explain the exodus of the thousands and thousands of Jews who left Russia from the last quarter of the nineteenth century till the outbreak of the First World War? And they never went back, or even wanted to return. Their nostalgia was not so much for Russia as it was for their childhood years in their native Jewish shteytl, "der heym," home. Their longing was for those whom they had left behind never to see again, including grandparents and great grandparents already in their graves on the outskirts of the countless Jewish villages and towns.

My mother's indomitable spirit was revealed to me especially when times had become oppressively difficult because it was almost impossible for my father find jobs. My mother never closed her eyes to that fact, but never gave in to despair. Often she would say, "Ikh hawb mahn betookhn nit fahrlawren," I have not lost my hope, that is she had not given in to despair. I never understood her obstinacy in not accepting the reality of our situation. Perhaps it was a sort of irrational myopia warping the normal logical thought processes of her view of reality? Or could it have been that she preferred to consider her imaginary hopes as realities, as existing facts? Did she really believe that something better would come around the corner very soon and hard times be a past memory? She never accepted the reality that the economic position of the family had declined and had fallen from relative opulence to privation in the space of a few years. In the worst of times, she never forgot the good times nor did she admit that they were past. She insisted in living in the hopes

that times would be better soon. She never accepted the reality that her ambitions and goals, not so much for herself, as for her family, had evolved into unattainable illusions. Nor could she conceive that as economic conditions became worse and worse and the symbols of the good life – the house, the two automobiles, the baby grand Knabe piano, the Persian carpets, the massive yet tasteful furniture, the musical concerts and the theatre, weekends in the country – were vestiges of past glories and not the life style forced upon us when my father's earning power vanished. The good life for my mother was the life of the intellect and the senses, an aesthetic interpretation of life made possible by first having enough for mundane daily needs and secondly also enough for those transcendental needs beyond shelter, clothing and food.

So her approach to life was sometime totally removed from the material facts of life. For example, we could have had one of the houses my father was building in Flushing, Long Island in 1924 without a down payment for the price of the first mortgage. Times were still good and my father never even broached the idea to her of moving to Flushing from Essex Street in East New York. He knew that moving to Flushing would have thwarted her ambitions, her dreams and aspirations for a better and "improved" life which she equated as living among in a more affluent and more cultured Jewish neighborhood than where we were living in East New York. Furthermore, it was absolutely unthinkable for her to live in Flushing which meant being the only Jewish family in a neighborhood inhabited wholly by gentiles. No matter how cultured and affluent and high class they were, they were still not Jews. Jewish standards of behavior and Jewish goals in life did not apply to them. Nor did the morality and the standards of life of the gentiles apply to Jews either. It is if my mother were living out the play *Fiddler on the Roof* – based on the stories of Tevyeh der milikhiger written by Sholem Aleichem – in which Tevyeh tells his daughter Khava who had fallen in love with a gentile that a fish and a bird, a Jew and a goy, may love each other, but where will they live? The fish lives in the water and the bird lives in a tree.

Her attitude was not racist in the pejorative sense as it would commonly be categorized today. It was just a recognition of the differences between Jew and gentile, each having the right to be different one from the other, and not interested in forcing one's beliefs on the other. My father rarely did jobs for Jews. He worked mainly for gentile clients. Some of his closest business associations were with non-Jews, especially Fred De Houst and old Mr. James who saved our house, or Marty Mirabel the Italian-Sicilian bricklayer contractor, a most unusual blonde haired Sicilian, whose wife cooked only kosher meat. They all held him, and likewise he them, in high esteem. The great differences in the private lives and ideals of the immigrant Russian Jew, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and the Italian Catholic never intruded or colored the dealings, both private and business, they had with each other.

So my mother perceived the Jews of Crown Heights, especially those who lived on President Street and were the most affluent in the whole neighborhood judging by the size and style of their houses, were worthy of emulation because they had risen high above their humble immigrant beginnings. And the truth is, at least from my own experience after we moved to Empire Boulevard in 1926 when I entered Erasmus Hall High School, that the inhabitants, all Jews, of Crown Heights were certainly more refined, educated and cultured than the working-class Jews of East New York or of Brownsville where I was born and where my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins all lived at the time.

Both my mother's and my father's families and thousands of other Jewish families besides, had all been part of a series of migratory movements each succeeding one a rung higher and higher up the economic and cultural ladder – from Russia to the Lower East Side of New York, then to Brownsville, then to East New York, then to Crown Heights, finally to Long Island.

In almost all cases, the first American rung was the Lower East Side from whence the movement branched off. Many other patterns of the same kind developed, but to different places – to the Bronx, the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Harlem and finally Westchester County. Still other patterns branched out to Chicago, to Cleveland, to Detroit to the mid-west and even to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

But my family, except for my father's brother Moishe who went to Cleveland later on or my mother's sister Libeh who moved to Los Angeles, all followed the same steps of the migratory pattern – from Russia to New York's Lower East Side, to Brownsville and then to other neighborhoods in Brooklyn such as East New York, Boro Park, Crown Heights, Long Island.

Crown Heights was the pinnacle, the acme, the topmost rung on the ladder of the good life and the reason why my mother aspired to live there, eventfully against all odds.

My mother always aspired to the finer things in life which had been far beyond her reach even as an immigrant child working in a sweat shop and living in a crowded East Side tenement. The finer things in life principally meant literature, the theatre and music, in fine an elegant and cultured life. She expended great efforts in her striving to realize her aspirations and goals even while she was a sweat shop drudge still in her teens.

After she and my father married, she forged even further forward to a more refined and cultured life made possible by my father's earnings. She had no desire to be like the working-class families among who she lived when she first married or after I and Esther were born and when we moved to Essex Street in East New York. She did not want her children to be like the children of the families among whom we lived.

And how I suffered as a child because of aspirations to refinement and culture. She insisted that we were better than our neighbors and had to act

accordingly. We had to avoid being like the rough and sometimes uncouth foul-mouthed children of the neighborhood. Until about the age of seven or eight or so, at least until I was in the second grade, I had a Buster Brown haircut. Worse still, I wore high Buster Brown stiff white collars with a large flowing red silk cravat. All the boys wore long, black, ribbed, cotton stockings, I had to wear long white ones. I was fated to be called sissy by all the rough neck kids on the block and in school.

My mother sewed all of Esther's and my clothes, usually white short pants and white blouses. Only in winter would the color of the stockings be black and my pants and shirts or blouses of a darker color.

I certainly looked different from all the other children. The fact is that I really felt and knew I was different, not so much because of my sissy clothes, but because we had a baby grand piano in the parlour, that I had to take violin lessons and practice in addition to going to Hebrew school each day. I may have felt different, but I did not feel I was better. I really longed to be the same as the other boys if no other reason not to be taunted by them.

Yet, no other family on the block had a piano, let alone a baby grand; no other boy on the block had a set of the *Book of Knowledge* or, later on when I was in the seventh grade or so, a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. And even more, my father was the first one on the block to own an automobile, a Model T open Ford. It was not until I used to go to the job with my father in Flushing, that I found friends, gentile friends it turned out, like Herbert Haverfield, who were no different from me. And when I entered high school when we moved to Crown Heights, did I find Jewish boys – Sidney Gurfein, Jesse Loskowitz, Eddie Kemp and Arnold Albert – with whom I also had much in common. So my mother was right all the time in insisting that my hair be cut Buster Brown fashion, that I wear white stockings in token of the fact that I had to seek and reach a higher plane of life than that with which I was surrounded on Essex Street and in P. S. 64.