

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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GROWING UP IN MANHATTAN

by Wilma Casella, Helen Villa and
Bernice Shapiro

We didn't know each other then; we met when we moved to Pennswood Village. As we got to know one another and began talking about our growing up years in Manhattan in the 1930s and 1940s, we were struck by the similarity of our experiences even though we grew up in different neighborhoods. How come? How was this possible? What bonded us?

Wilma in East Harlem

It was something so simple that is now lost in Manhattan and, in my opinion, in our country. It was the concept of a neighborhood that was provided by the public schools, public transportation and libraries. All three of us walked to our neighborhood public schools, one to three blocks from home. We went home for lunch, or, on occasion, brought an ethnic lunch (maybe pancetta and mozzarella on Italian bread for me) to school in a paper bag.

Containers of milk were provided by the school.

In those days, the public schools, police department, fire department, sanitation department and libraries were run by the Irish, who had risen from their immigrant status to become a powerful political force in the city. The teachers in the public schools were primarily Irish and graduates of parochial schools, and thus brought that style of education into the public schools. There were exceptions. On the Lower East Side, some Jewish teachers were hired to recognize that ethnic group, but still most were Irish. In contrast, in the South Bronx, where my husband went to school, the community was primarily Jewish and so were the teachers, with a few Irish thrown in. Administrators were all Irish.

The public school curriculum was the same city wide. Uniforms were worn. Girls wore navy skirts and white middie blouses with red bows. Hair was combed back from the face and a hair band or bow was worn. Navy knee-highs and black shoes completed the look. Boys

wore navy knickers with navy knee-highs, black shoes, white shirts (tucked into the pants), black belts and red ties.

Manners were stressed. We sat in our seats, backs straight, hands folded, as the teacher lectured on a particular subject. The only sounds heard were the class recital of the multiplication tables or poems, or the muffled noise as we stood up when a teacher or principal or vice principal or guests visited our classroom.

In all five boroughs once a year, there was standardized testing in math, reading and writing. By the end of third grade, students were identified for special academic programs that continued through the eighth grade. This was to prepare us for the entrance exam to the free university system of the city. Emphasis was also placed on the state regent exams in high school.

The school day started with all of us lining up outside the building, girls on the left, boys on the right. When the school bell rang, we quieted down and went in and marched along the hallway silently and in straight lines, hugging the walls. I hated this. As I look back, it reminds me of the early movies with men in jail marching to breakfast, to a lecture, to a religious sermon, always silent with the odd noise of their shoes shuffling on the cement floor.

Once in class, we marched up to the teacher for hand inspection, and she would determine if we washed

properly and if our fingers and nails were clean. Once a week, she would also examine our hair with a special stick to determine if we had lice. She would check our clothes to determine how clean they were. The implication (as I look back) is that immigrant children came from homes where cleanliness was not stressed.

Immigrants were considered dirty.

Then we saluted the flag and pledged allegiance and closed with a singing of our national anthem, and finally our classwork began. These rituals were to turn us into Americans—very clean, patriotic and god-fearing people.

On Fridays, we had a general assembly with all classes. We saluted the flag and sang the anthem, and then the principal read a prayer from the Old Testament of the King James Bible.

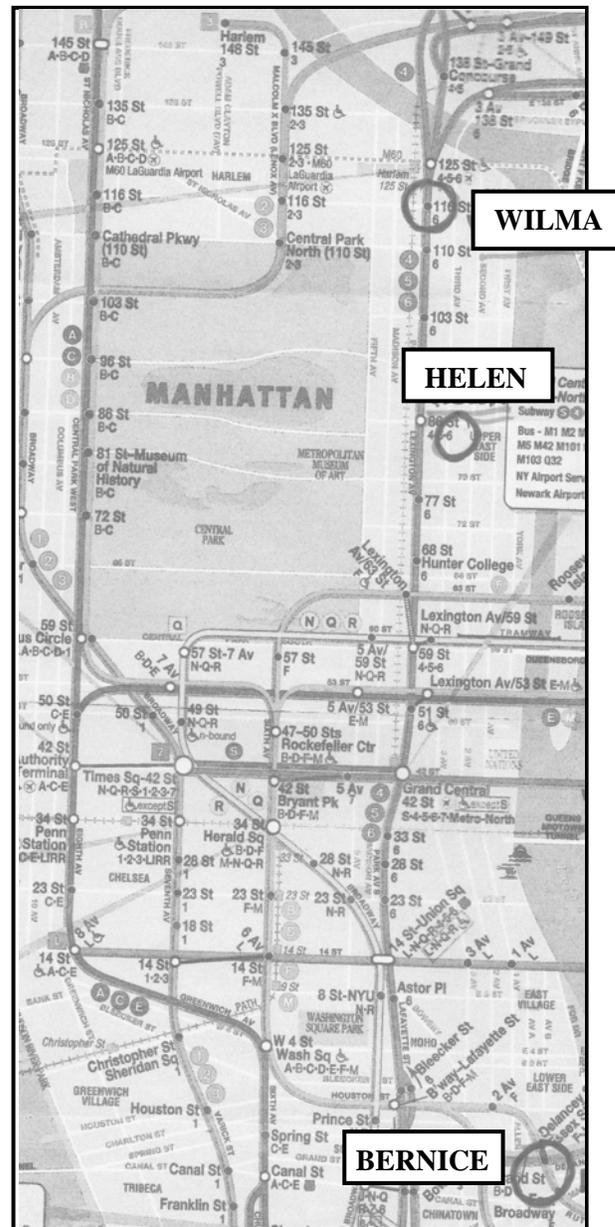
So here we were, immigrant children of various religious backgrounds, forced to listen to a weekly prayer that we did not understand, followed by a Protestant hymn, usually “Onward Christian Soldiers,” a hymn I still react negatively to when I hear it.

Finally, bored, I decided to ask my father about this King James. Why is he writing Protestant prayers, and why are we singing a song about war? End result: my father told me to ignore the prayer and the Bible (which he called a book of fairy tales written by men). He went to the school to complain that no prayers should be offered in public

schools where children come from all religious backgrounds. He was rejected. At the same time, *The New York Times* was reporting on the Scopes trial, regarding a teacher in Tennessee who was trying to teach evolution in his science class. My father contacted the law firm that was handling that teacher's case. Although that teacher lost, the case of prayer in public schools was brought before the Supreme Court, and it ruled against prayer in public schools.

So, as Bernice, Helen and I talked about our individual neighborhoods, we found more similarities. There was the public library. East Harlem had two 3-story buildings, one at 110th Street and Second Avenue and one at 125th Street on Lexington Avenue. Both are still in existence. The library system in New York City was developed by Andrew Carnegie, an immigrant who became extremely wealthy. When he saw the large increase in immigrants, many of whom had no books and were illiterate, he wanted a place for them to learn to read, to obtain books and to attend lectures, so that America would have a more educated population.

Every Monday, my father took my brother and me to the 125th Street library. He became friends with the chief librarian, and she would always have two books available for me and two for my brother. Upon returning them the following week, we also had



to give her a one-page paper about each book, telling the characters, the plot and the ending.

Our neighborhoods were similar in other ways. Within walking distance, we had ethnic butchers, bakeries, fruit and vegetable markets, ice cream parlors and soda cafés run by immigrant

Greeks. There were pizza shops, Kosher restaurants and fresh chicken markets (usually Kosher) run by Jewish vendors and rabbis. There were Italian restaurants. I remember pharmacies, with their three red balls hanging outside, run by Italian pharmacists who spoke a number of languages including Yiddish. In East Harlem there was an Italian store selling various coffee beans, which they ground for you according to the coffee maker you used. They also sold various types of Italian coffee machines or Neopolitan coffee pots.

I remember the aroma of the store because upstairs on the second and third floor was the Italian School, run by Italian teachers from Italy all of whom spoke four or five languages, including English. The books came from Italy with a foreword by Benito Mussolini, who wrote that he wanted us to be proud of our Italian heritage and to be good students in learning the culture, history and language of Italy. I attended classes Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. and Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Each of our neighborhoods had an avenue devoted to pushcarts from which fruits, vegetables, meats, clothes, etc. were sold. About 1940, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia did away with the open-air markets and enclosed them in what looked like large garages. Doing so resulted in the loss of an ambience of conviviality, and

people were unhappy with their new environment.

Another thing that added to our sense of community was the excellent (at that time) New York City transportation system of trains, buses and trolley cars. For 10 cents, one could go on the subway to the main public library in Manhattan, the Museum of Natural History, the Academy of Music in Brooklyn, the Yiddish or Italian theater in the Lower East Side, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Bronx Zoo or the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The city offered so many opportunities.

Bernice, Helen and I were most fortunate to have lived in a time of community, connections and people.

Our sense of community began to change as we entered different high schools with diversified student bodies. Since we all had to travel miles to these schools, the city give us voucher cards to pay for transportation by train or bus or trolley. Upon graduation, we all got jobs and thus entered a very diversified employment world in the city for which we were prepared and in which we went on to successful careers.

Helen in Yorkville

Growing up in the Yorkville section of Manhattan meant lots of German restaurants, delicatessens, stores, beer halls and dance halls. The smell of roasting hot dogs and sauerkraut was the

essence of Third Avenue and 86th Street, where the corner store always had its windows open, winter or summer. There also was a three-story cultural center where I spent time after school, learning German on the second floor and playing in the gymnasium on the third floor, while enjoying the fine cooking aromas from the restaurant on the first floor.

(One of those strange coincidences in life occurred as Wilma, Bernice and I were discussing this article. It seems that Wilma's future father-in-law owned the coat-check concession in that cultural center.)

When the United States entered WWII, our gymnasium instructors were immediately requisitioned by the army, classes were suspended, and only the restaurant remained. Many years later, John F. Kennedy frequented that gymnasium when Jackie lived a few blocks away in the city.

Our apartment was a typical railroad flat—three rooms in line, with entry through the middle kitchen door. The commode was in the hall, shared by the other three apartments' residents on our floor. Mr. Nussbaum's wife wouldn't let him smoke his cigars in the apartment, so our hall always had a tobacco scent, but luckily we were on the fifth floor which led to the roof and an upward draft always wafted the aroma away.

For our bath, the kitchen washtub drain board was removed, and we would climb up into the tub. It was also used for washing our clothes. To this day, I relish showers.

We hung our laundry on the roof, hoping that the wind direction would blow the coal dust away from our wet linens. The coal was delivered to the basement furnace through a chute on the street in front of our apartment building when the iron sidewalk doors were opened. It was the apartment house's source for steam heat with a radiator in each of the rooms. The heat was turned on and off at a certain date every year, no matter the weather.

In warm weather, our iceman regularly delivered one large block of ice. He would carry it up the five flights of stairs on his back (which was protected by a thick padding). The ice was held in place with enormous metal tongs. Our icebox backed on a window "airyway" for outside drainage, as did all the other iceboxes on each floor.

We all walked to our neighborhood elementary and middle schools, but rode the trolley car (free with school passes) for high school. The College of the City of New York selected, via exams, students for their free education, with stipulations for attendance, grades, etc., to assure each place was utilized to the best possible advantage every term. Our books were provided each semester and, when returned, were inspected to insure

that only minimal wear had occurred. Students were allowed to purchase some of these used books at discounted prices. Without that free education, most of us immigrants' children would never have been able to afford college. The city also accommodated the returning GIs. I remember one of my fellow night school students drifting off in class after informing me that his wife had just had a baby the night before.

And then there were the native New Yorkers that lived with us all . . . our cockroaches. Whenever guests were arriving with us at the apartment, the first resident in immediately turned on the light, so that the roaches would scurry out of sight before the guests came into the kitchen. No matter how many times we did a full-house fumigation, they would return within three to six months.

When I went to show my son where I grew up, I was surprised that this apartment house was still standing and occupied. I hope it has been internally renovated, and I wonder if they still walk up to the fifth floor.

Bernice in the Lower East Side

I was looking forward to our trip because my mother told me to wear shoes—so I expected the trip would be something special. I polished the shoes as best I could and even put on new socks and a new summer dress that

Mama had made me with ruffles around the neck. The year was 1937. It was during the Depression, and my father had been out of work for some time. I was seven years old.

That trip with my mother was by train from Atlanta to New York. Along the way, we opened the heavy brown bag that Aunt Jenny had sent with us and found small packages of fried chicken, biscuits, sweet potato pie AND plenty of paper napkins!

When the train stopped in Washington, DC, the windows were opened, and we bought coffee and cookies from young men in uniforms who smiled at us and spoke so fast that I could not understand a word. I worried if I would ever be able to talk in the North or learn their language.

At the station in New York City, we transferred to another kind of train: “the El.” It ran on a two-story elevated track through the city. That ride was exciting, because our windows were level with the second-story apartment windows we were passing. We could see inside, and often the occupants would wave to us. New Yorkers are so friendly!

We went to my aunt and uncle's apartment in the Bronx and, after anxiously ringing the doorbell, we were met with hugs and kisses. My Aunt Shirley had prepared a good dinner while my Uncle Arthur was working late at his butcher shop. After dinner,

my two cousins and I played Monopoly and listened to a 17-year-old Frank Sinatra singing on the radio. We would stay with my aunt and uncle for several weeks.

The day after our arrival, Aunt Shirley took me to a shoe store which had x-ray equipment (a fluoroscope) to help show the condition of my feet. I was fitted with lace-up, ankle-high, ugly brown shoes. I could hardly contain my tears. Later, Shirley became my favorite aunt.

After a few weeks, we found an apartment to rent for \$15 a month on the Lower East Side near the Williamsburg Bridge. And my Dad, who had stayed behind in Atlanta to close our rented bungalow and pack our remaining things to send to New York, came and joined us.

Our apartment was a third-floor walk-up without heat. The toilet was down the long public hall and was shared with five other families. There was only one entrance into the apartment—a door in the kitchen. Immediately to the right of the door was a large bathtub. At bath time, the door would be closed and locked with a heavy chain. The heavy lid would be removed from the tub, and we had to use a stool to climb in and out of it. My most unfavorable thing was the oilcloth covering the floor, its frayed edges exposing the boards underneath. It would be a while before we could afford to replace it. There was also a

pot-bellied iron stove on which the Sabbath tzimmes could be slow-cooked. Tzimmes was a delicious mixture of meat and prunes which we ate from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday when the Sabbath restrictions were over. Although the stove gave a little heat to the apartment, we still had to take hot water bottles to bed with us in the winter.

Next to the kitchen to the right was a bedroom with two windows overlooking the street. Outside one of the windows was a fire escape, which we used as our hot weather patio. A dance hall in the building across the street gave us some entertainment.

To the left of the kitchen was a small interior room which sometimes was used as my bedroom or was rented to a boarder—not uncommon on the Lower East Side.

On Yom Kippur, my mother and I would walk to the nearby Williamsburg Bridge and watch the crowds of Jews, dressed in their somber black, symbolically throwing their sins into the water, after asking forgiveness of those they had offended during the previous year.

My public elementary school was within walking distance. I could go home for lunch if my mother wasn't working, or I could purchase food from pushcarts on the street. My public school was called "experimental" and tried to give us a variety of experiences.

For instance, *The New York Times* was distributed to us, and we were assigned articles, marked in red pencil, to read and to report on to the class for discussion. Music appreciation was a favorite hour each week, and I can still hum some of the music. And, while there, I was chosen by my teacher to take art classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School.

Three of us from my class were assigned to a wonderful young social worker. He took us to museums and other places of special interest, such as the New York Public Library (when the Gutenberg Bible was on loan), the Fulton Fish Market and other places we probably would not have seen on our own until much later, if ever.

I had never met such an erudite person or one so caring. Later, when he joined the military, we three wrote to him and received the most beautiful long letters back, encouraging each of us to keep up our good grades. Eventually, the military sent him to Tuskegee, AL, for flight training.

He was certainly one of the most influential people in my life.

Later, when I was in my teens, my father had a job with the Brooklyn Navy Yard. This led to his being able to rent an apartment in a nearby project, newly built for Navy personnel. Our life changed considerably.

* * * * *

CHIRP, CHIRP . . . **A peek at nature through your window** **by Steve Schnur**

“Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top.
When the wind blows, the cradle will
rock.
When the bough breaks, the cradle will
fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and
all.”

The American robin is probably our most familiar songbird, one of 18 thrushes in North America. It could tell great stories if you’d just ask, only a few as sad as the rhyme above.

Robins are in our yards every day, but we might not realize how enterprising they are. They occur throughout all of North America, from Mexico to northernmost Alaska. Conquerors of the continent, they weigh not quite three ounces.

Robins seem to disappear in the winter and reappear in the spring. Don’t be fooled! Robins are here year round. When things get frosty and the earthworms dig down out of reach, robins will forsake our lawns for berry bushes and fruit trees. But they’re still around.

Robins cock their heads so they can hear those noisy little worms. Right? Nope! Robins will cock their heads on a lawn even with bulldozers rumbling

nearby. So why do they cock their heads? With one eye on each side of their heads, they do have greater peripheral vision, but they can't focus both eyes on an earthworm as we could. So they turn their heads for a better look with their dominant eye.

Robins' nests are made of grasses and weeds worked into wet mud, which the female carries from a stream in her beak. A common cause of nest failure is a soaking rain which can dissolve the mud nest, leading to "down will come baby, cradle and all" despite the female's efforts to shield the nest from the rain by spreading her wings over it. Robins will nest twice and even three times a year in our region to offset their high mortality rate, estimated at about 70 percent per year. It really is a jungle out there for birds. Few robins reach their fifth birthday. No, our avian neighbors do not die of old age.

We owe so much to robins. They are the Johnny Appleseeds of North America. Countless undigested fruit and berry seeds pass through them and are dropped far and wide, resulting in the greening of the continent.

**FACING AHEAD,
LOOKING BEHIND
THROUGH A MIRROR,
DARKLY
by John Wood**

All those spinning years, with the
sun arise,
And, with the rising of the moon,
witness day's demise.
The price for lengthened living,
attending death
Of those who yesterday walked at
your side.
It takes two hands to count the times
That part of me has died,
Rising with the sun to find
The sum of parts less than that
supplied;
And that to bless that which is left is
key,
Not just mourning loss of what you
had before
So, you may understand if now see
fit
To rail against the death and dying
thing
And hold fast against the closing of
the final door.

RECOVERED

by “Petey” Gladys P. Schwarcz

Small and mute, still and grave,
she stared at me many nights,
the child-self of all my yesterdays,
not beholden, not accusatory,
but staunchly present, guilelessly
silent, yet asking for . . .

Only after her refusal to disappear,
explain her presence, speak
words I might understand, did I
accept what she did not or could
not express and wordlessly enfolded
her into my being, recognizing
her rightful place within me, her
critical existence, the emptiness
she was always meant to fill, even
from day one, and I welcomed
her dear necessity into the void
I had suffered from, relieved
that that wavering nothingness I
had carried around for decades
now provided the refuge where
She had always belonged.

TYPIST NEEDED

Several times a year, Village Voices receives manuscripts that are written in longhand. We are looking for someone to type these manuscripts and email them to Dick Piccolini, our layout person.

Call Anne Baber at 913-568-2339 to volunteer.

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