

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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HERO OR SCOUNDREL?

by George Kurz

“I wonder what those iron pipes sticking out of the water out there are,” I mused to Elisabeth on our initial visit to Ocean City, NJ, in March 1982.

Why would anyone want to go to Ocean City in March! For us, the occasion was our honeymoon, and we were intent on enjoying every minute, riding our bicycles, walking the boardwalk, flying kites on the beach, and never giving a second thought to the wintry weather.

From where we stood on the boardwalk near 17th Street, only a narrow stretch of beach separated us from the edge of the ocean, even though the tide was low. The strange pattern of twisted metal easily visible between the breakers was probably a mere 75 yards away from us. A sign on the beach warned swimmers to stay clear of the area.

“Could they be part of an old shipwreck?” Elisabeth asked.

“I’ll bet they could,” I responded.

A visit to Ocean City for two or three days became an annual tradition for us. Each time we saw the jagged metal out in the ocean, one of us was sure to comment, “Our shipwreck’s still there,” or “I wonder if they will ever clean it up.”

On about our 15th visit to Ocean City, the beach was a beehive of activity. Enormous pipelines ran virtually the full length of the beach. Noisy earthmoving equipment was pushing sand everywhere. Strange-appearing ships sat far offshore near the north end of the island. “Oh, they’re sucking up sand from the bottom of the ocean out there,” we were told. “The beach is going to be restored.” Ocean City was at last correcting decades of erosion of its beaches.

When we returned the following year, the change was dramatic. The level of the sand under the boardwalk was a good eight or ten feet higher than it had been. Just beyond the boardwalk, there was a new sand dune. Whereas previously the water came right in under the boardwalk and at high tide waves often splashed against the bulkheads protecting homes in that area, now the

ocean's edge was nearly 100 yards beyond the boardwalk, even at high tide. Ocean City's beach restoration project had been a success. Our "shipwreck" had completely disappeared. We had no idea whether it had been removed or was just covered by sand.

The boardwalk has several wooden pavilions that project out over the beach, providing lovely places to sit in the shade and enjoy the sound of waves and seagulls. One of these pavilions prominently displayed its name in large capital letters: SINDIA. A nearby sign marked the location of the wreck on December 15, 1901, of the *Sindia*, a four-masted steel bark built in Ireland in 1887. According to the sign, she was carrying a cargo of porcelain, fine China, manganese ore, and other items from Kobe, Japan, to New York under the command of Captain Allen McKenzie when she ran aground in a storm. Stuck on the sand for three or four days, she eventually split in two and flooded. Most of the cargo was lost, but there was no loss of life, thanks to the heroic efforts of the Ocean City Life Saving Station.

The entire wreck, including the bit that had projected above the water in years past, was indeed buried in sand. Visitors were referred to the Ocean City Historical Museum for more information.

Elisabeth knew I was hooked. We took our bikes, left the boardwalk, and

headed for the museum. There we found a sizable exhibit devoted to the *Sindia*. Pictures of the ship showed her magnificence with three square-rigged forward masts and a gaff-rigged mizzenmast. Many objects recovered from the ship were on display, including fine china cups and saucers.

The highlight of the museum's exhibit was a video which included the voices, recorded in 1959, of two eyewitnesses to the shipwreck. One man told how as a boy he could see the stranded ship out his window from his home on Asbury Avenue.

It was all very convincing—convincing, that is, until our next trip to Ocean City.

When I mentioned my interest in the ship to the owner of the bed and breakfast where we stayed, whom I shall call Leonard, he came alive. "The *Sindia* was the largest ship under sail in the world," he claimed. "She had an experienced captain who would know he wasn't at New York City. He could see the Atlantic City lighthouse from far out and would know where Ocean City was.

"Besides," Leonard continued, "He came in under full sail. I've checked the weather records, and there's no record of any severe storm at that time."

"I don't get it. Why then was the *Sindia* wrecked?" I asked.

"According to the ship's manifest, she was carrying 200 tons of manganese,"

Leonard elucidated. “None of that was ever recovered. I’ve researched the newspaper accounts. What really mattered was 72 tons of silver coins from China. Yes, the crew was all rescued, but the officers stayed on board till those silver coins were all brought ashore.”

With that, Leonard reached onto a shelf in his kitchen and produced a silver coin, about the size of a half-dollar. It had Chinese writing on one side, English on the other. “Are you saying this was one of the coins on the *Sindia*?” I inquired.

“No. But it’s one like the coins that the captain brought in. He had on board his own personal cargo which he insured separately, not with the insurance for the regular cargo. Actually, the cargo was largely contraband from Shanghai where vendors were selling goods for five cents on the dollar. He had the cargo in huge cartons. The money that captain made went to finance oil exploration in Oklahoma by Rockefeller.”

“Are you saying the ship was wrecked deliberately, Leonard?” I asked incredulously.

“Due diligence has not been exercised,” Leonard went on, ignoring my question. “Probably one-third is still in the ship under the sand. Cofferdams would have to be built around the area, the sand removed, and the ship emptied before we would have

the whole story. It would be an expensive project, but it would be fascinating. We would expect the sale of the cargo to cover the cost and yield a handsome profit as well. Can you imagine the tourists wanting to watch? Why, money could be made just selling T-shirts!”

I decided to ask Leonard no further questions, although several were on my mind. Would he someday organize an excavation of the *Sindia*? Was he probing for people who might be willing to invest in his dream project? There could be no doubting that her cargo included fine china. We had seen examples in the museum. But could Leonard prove his theory that the ship had, instead of the manganese on its manifest, a cargo of contraband, which led the captain, fearing detection were he to land in New York, to decide his chances were better if he deliberately ran his ship aground?

In short, was Captain McKenzie a hero, as one might conclude from reading the sign along the Ocean City boardwalk, or actually a scoundrel? It may take many decades of natural beach erosion and/or an enterprising archaeological team, but I hope one day we will know the answer to the mysterious shipwreck of the *Sindia*.

BEYOND THE PARKWAY by Kay Silberfeld

It was a question I hadn’t considered until a recent exchange of emails with a

close friend from childhood. How was it possible that in the late 1930s, my Jewish grandfather was able to purchase property in Greenwich, CT, a town known for its anti-Semitism? The same friend told me that she used to hear her mother refer to “those people who lived beyond the parkway.” “Beyond the parkway” was a phrase I had never heard before, but, indeed, that’s where my grandfather’s property was and where I lived as a child. It also explains why none of my (gentile) school friends lived nearby and why there had been a gradual influx of other Jewish families into our area.

It amazes me now how ignorant I was, particularly for someone growing up during WWII. My first awareness of any distinction between myself as a Jew and non-Jews occurred when I was about 11 years old. A gentile friend invited me to go to a dance at the Greenwich Country Club. Next came a telephone call from her mother to my parents. Her mother said that she thought I might be uncomfortable at the Club, and she withdrew her daughter’s invitation. The call led to a serious and upsetting family discussion.

Another late childhood eye-opener was my mother insisting I change out of my sporty clothes (were there blue jeans back then?) before she would take me into town (Greenwich). Her explanation was that I had an obligation to my fellow Jews to dress appropriately, so other people

wouldn’t say, “Oh those Jews. . . they don’t know how to behave properly.”

While I was in elementary school in Greenwich, my non-Greenwich grandmother came with my mother to pick me up. Apparently, she then told my parents they could not keep me in that school because she had not seen any other Jewish children there (I was not the only one). I didn’t change schools, but the question itself indicates the uneasiness of the time and the variety of attitudes in my family.

Looking back now, I’m glad I was so unaware of being different (Jewish). The “beyond the parkway” property was a wonderful place to grow up. And I was further fortunate that the principal of the school I went to in Greenwich was accepting of all individual differences. One after-effect of all this is my hesitation even now to say that I’d lived in Greenwich as a child.

Another part of this story took place at Harvard Summer School just before my senior year in college. Neither of my two roommates there had previously associated with a Jew or with someone from the New York City area. Those relationships worked out all right, but the one with a summer boyfriend ended badly. He came from a small town in Ohio where there weren’t any Jews, plus my association with New York City (it was new to me that this gave me an air of sophistication which could put people off) made him uneasy. In addition, he had a job working in a

parking garage. A customer he thought was Jewish gave him a hard time, and therefore, “all Jews. . . .”

It was quite an educational summer. Among the things I learned, aside from more art history, was what a sheltered childhood I had had growing up “beyond the parkway.”

Fiction

FORSYTHIA ON FIRE

by Yoma Ullman

For many years, Mrs. Willis had thought of her single infidelity with satisfaction. Indeed, she had revisited it many times, suppressing the faint feeling of guilt the memory aroused in favor of more pleasant recollections. She liked to remember the heightened perception of the spring she experienced that year. She was at the time living in Washington, DC, a city of many parks. Every spray of yellow forsythia had been etched sharply against the soft new green. Pink cherry blossoms had bobbed against the bluest of skies. Yellow and cream daffodils had transformed the parks. The movie “The Graduate” had just opened, and the sound track was everywhere. Its songs became her theme music. “Scarborough Fair” and the forsythia had been entangled in her mind. “Sounds of Silence” had expressed the miserable frustration that ensued. And as for “Mrs. Robinson,”

well, she hadn’t liked to think about that one.

Her children had been so young at the time that she had convinced herself they had no idea what was going on. She had decided not to worry about them. As they grew up, they learned they must not play those songs. Their mother would get angry and then sad. Yet it amused her to think she could be so sensitive, to notice their awareness of her, even to know she was violating their innocence.

But many years had gone by. The children were grown and gone. When Mrs. Willis revisited the forsythia, the cherry blossoms, the daffodils, they no longer had that unusual clarity. The music was hardly ever on the radio as she drove, and she never played it at home. As she became older, she grew, to her surprise, happy with this development. Where once she had scratched at the memories, as at poison ivy, eager to feel something, anything, now she let them be. It was, finally, a relief to be free of them. After many years away, she moved back to Washington. She wondered if being back there would give the memories their old magic, but after a while, she realized they were gone.

One late winter, she was sitting on the Metro in the early afternoon, thinking placidly about the educational toys she would buy for her grandchildren later that day at a little store she knew on upper Connecticut Avenue. She moved

on to think equally placidly about the dinner she had scheduled that night with an old friend who was coming in from New York. She sat abstracted, calm, complacent, in a seat near the exit.

At Dupont Circle, a man carrying a guitar came aboard. He stood between the opposing doors and quickly tuned the instrument.

Mrs. Willis did not like musicians who played in the subway. They embarrassed her. She was sure they were illegal. She did not like to have her reactions, and her money, demanded from a distance of a few feet. She retreated into her abstraction, gazing firmly at her reflection in the window beside her, which also showed two young tourists who sat slumped in the seat behind her. When they spoke, it was in German. She promised herself a treat of coffee and a scone when she was next above ground.

The man with the guitar was a type Mrs. Willis knew all too well. He was no longer young, his lank hair was dirty and badly cut, his shirt was open down his shaggy chest, his jeans were far from clean, and he wore tattered running shoes. She thought she could smell beer and harsh cigarette smoke. He looked more like a truck driver than a guitarist, more a frequenter of taverns than of a *ceilidh*. After one glance she turned away, refusing to acknowledge him, withdrawing into

herself. But then he began to sing. The song was "Mrs. Robinson."

Mrs. Willis was forced violently into the present and the past simultaneously. For the present, claustrophobia clamped down on her. She needed to get out of the train at once, but the next station, Woodley Park, was some way off. Her head felt as if it would explode. Played harshly, the chords of the song clanged in her skull. She looked at the impassive faces around her with some vague idea of getting help. But the young Germans had gone to sleep, their heads nodding together. Across the aisle, a business woman checked flow charts and an older man read the sports page. Down the car, a young mother stabilized a stroller with her foot, and the baby inside it sat entranced as he sucked his pacifier.

As for the past, the shock had come when she was relaxed and vulnerable. That springtime episode could not have been further from her mind. Now it was with her again, totally, brutally. There was no satisfaction this time, no hint of that long-ago elation. She was prey to her unedited reactions, and they came at her in a rush.

She had spent so many hours persuading herself that although her lover had been some years younger than she was, she was not, of course, Mrs. Robinson. He was no innocent, and she had been torn apart in a way Mrs. Robinson would never have admitted to, even if it had been true. Nor did she meet him in hotel

rooms for illicit sex. It had been a matter of endless phone conversations, of hidden tears, of solitary appreciation of that heightened awareness.

She had also believed that because they never actually slept together, it wasn't classic infidelity. With the whip of the song on her, she was reminded that infidelity came in many forms and didn't necessarily include physical contact.

The car was airless; she could hardly breathe. She looked at the other faces. They were without expression, without sympathy. The young mother popped bubble gum, the baby sucked away. No one paid her the least attention.

How would she survive until she could escape at the next station? The train was slowing down as it so often did, conspiring with the singer to make sure she could not avoid hearing every word of the song. He had reached the line about having to hide it from the kids.

They'd been so small at the time, surely untouched by their mother's preoccupation, her occasional paroxysms of tears. Yet one evening, watching Mr. Rogers's new show for children, the older child had turned from the screen and asked her mother, "Wouldn't you like to be married to Mr. Rogers?"

Now, far under Rock Creek, Mrs. Willis knew for sure that her child had been aware that something was going

on. She had tried to blind herself to this possibility and had done so successfully for decades. As the song scourged her, she admitted that she had very probably damaged her children.

And as for the marriage, whose faults even a five-year-old could see? What had she done to that? She twisted in her seat, trying to get away from her thoughts.

Things had never been the same after that spring. Not that they had been ideal before the forsythia broke into bloom and lit her world with temporary fire. Her husband worked long hours and loved it. He had never seemed to notice the change in her. She was stuck home with small children. The unexpected elation, the feeling of reciprocated interest and understanding, had swept her away.

In spite of herself, she looked at the guitar player again. She could hardly believe that this ugly man had thrown her back to that spring only to destroy her carefully constructed memories and hold up a mirror in which she was forced to see that all her rationalizations were dishonest. He seemed to be looking directly at her, his expression a quizzical probe.

She turned away once more and looked down the car. She met the brown eyes of the baby in the stroller. The pacifier had just dropped out of his mouth, and he was realizing that his one comfort in this bewildering world was gone. His

mother was reading an ad on the wall above her and chewing steadily on her gum.

Together, Mrs. Willis and the baby reached the end of their endurance. The baby opened his mouth and let out a cry of such desolation that everyone in the car turned toward him. Mrs. Willis wished with all her heart that she could permit herself a similar cry. Instead she gathered up her bags, pulled herself to her feet, and made her way unsteadily toward the opposite end of the car as, at last, the train pulled into the station.

THE BEACH by Gene Carlough

Busy gulls, and castles built.
Creatures beached and shine of sand.
Ocean smell and lap of waves,
Plus the heat of shining sun.
What a day to be alive,
Walking on the beach with you.

A SPECIAL BIG BROTHER, SHIRLEY TEMPLE AND THE PRESIDENT

(Note: This piece is reprinted from The Pennsylvania Polio Survivors newsletter.)

Jo Gross was born in Deadwood, SD,

where she lived with her parents and her older brother (whom she describes as her hero). She was diagnosed with polio at the age of four and remembers very little of it; however does not feel as though she suffered with it very badly while she was sick. The disease subsided after about a year, and she went on to have a healthy, normal childhood.

Jo's family lived within view of Mount Rushmore. They would go over to the "site" of its construction on weekends for family picnics. She can still remember when she and her brother had lunch with the workers.

Her father worked as a banker. When all the banks in South Dakota closed during the Depression, he was able to get a job and moved the family across the country to Washington, DC. She recalls that finances were strained, but praises her parents for never letting her know just how bad their financial situation really was.

While moving across the country was hard for her, Jo made the best of her situation during her junior high years in DC. "My parents both worked, so my girlfriend and I would walk around looking for things to do." She recalls becoming friendly with the guards at the White House, and they allowed her to access the grounds (while fellow polio survivor President Franklin Roosevelt was in office). She remembers playing inside the public rooms of the White House, pretending to have tea with

foreign princes. The girls were careful only to “squat” over the furniture, pretending to sit, since it was against the rules to sit on anything. She recalled a specific memory of doing this, and suddenly feeling as if someone was watching her. When she looked over, she saw President Roosevelt in his wheelchair, chuckling at her. Jo remembers that they spoke, but not what they spoke about, because she was too flustered!

Jo had many adventures at the White House during her preteen years. In the early summer of 1938, Jo and a friend went to the White House hoping for a chance to see Shirley Temple. One of the security guards tipped them off that Mrs. Roosevelt and Shirley Temple were in the garden. They ran there searching for them. They agreed to split up, and whistle if they saw her. Jo heard her friend whistle and immediately ran in that direction, only to turn the corner and run straight into, not only Shirley Temple herself but also Eleanor Roosevelt! “How embarrassing! I was so shocked that I could not say a word,” she recalls. Both she and Shirley fell down as a result.

Jo attended Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, MD. She went on to study at George Washington and Towson State Universities, wanting to become a teacher. She started out teaching 2nd grade, but went on to teach nearly all grades. Second graders remained her favorite, because she

liked to watch how easily children at this age took to reading. Her focus became Special Education.

Years later through mutual friends, she met her future husband Max, and they immediately hit it off. They married and moved to College Park, MD. In addition to Max’s four children from a previous marriage, Jo and Max had three children together.

At the age of 35, Jo started to experience symptoms of what she later discovered to be Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS). Her legs started to become very weak. She had considered polio to be a thing of the past, and therefore never really thought that it had anything to do with her symptoms.

Years later talking on the phone with her cousin who also had had polio as a child and been diagnosed with PPS, Jo realized their symptoms were the same and then considered that she might have PPS as well. Her main polio symptom as a child was weakness in the legs, and the same symptom had returned.

However, by knowing the explanation to her seemingly mysterious symptoms, and by working with doctors “willing to learn,” she explains that it is easier to deal with the PPS reality.

Jo and Max live in Pennswood Village. She started an active polio support group for the community. They call their group “Polio Plus” to include anyone with a physical disability or any

chronic long-term issue. The group now meets monthly. They consult each other regarding medical care and share their symptoms and life experiences.

Jo is a proud grandmother of 10 grandchildren. She has lived an extraordinary life full of friends, family and travel. She has traveled extensively with Max to many parts of the world, both on cruises and by plane, visiting scores of countries and seven continents.

Her life has truly been one of heroes and adventures.

REPORT ON MY COMPOST PILE

by Anne Baber

Who knows how you got there.
Maybe you sprouted
from a windblown seed. Maybe

a bird dropped you into
my carefully cultivated row.
Though I didn't even

know your name,
I fetched water, I fertilized,
I fussed over you. Finally

one day, I couldn't ignore
the obvious any longer: "Just
a weed," I muttered, yanking

you out by the roots.
I let you molder on the heap.
Ultimately, you, who were unable

to flower, serve my purpose.
By planting time this spring,
you were mulch. Thanks.

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