

Greetings:

1952

I was born in a slum tenement on Delancey St, in the shadow of the Williamsburg Bridge. A decaying structure, it lacked decent plumbing, light, heating, air. It teemed with people, immigrants who had fled from the tyrannies of Russia, Poland, Lithuania and Galicia. Their children, born in the new land, were Americans. My father was from Vilna, my mother from Bialystok. Some forty years later, I took my own children to see this tenement where I was born. It was still there, altho many slum bldgs had been torn down. It still teemed with tenants, mostly Puerto-Ricans now.

My mother would tell us a story about the time when I was born. It was deep in the Panic of 1907, stretching into 1908. Depression, unemployment, hunger and want. Hope flickered dim for the poor. How to earn each day, each week the pittance to feed children, to pay the rent. Unemployment insurance, child support, welfare aid, feed stamps were far in the future. My father was unemployed. One morning, when I was a month old, the family finances had dwindled to one 25¢ piece. Early that day, my father gave the coin to my mother, to see that we were fed - I and my sister, two years older. He would look for work. Long since, he had canvassed every East Side shop. So he walked across the bridge into Brooklyn, walked and walked, until good luck, he found a job, at meager wages but the crisis had been averted.

It was a turning point. Later, we were able to move to less decayed tenements. Toilet in the flat instead of in the hall, to be shared with other families on that floor. Or outhouses in the yard. On a winter night, it took a great resolve of courage. Then we moved to E. 8th St, near a park, wonderful place, and a library, the Ottendorfer Branch, can I ever forget it? Now we were six children. We moved to the East Bronx and we older ones were going to PS 30 and PS 37. Then, one day, my father came home to tell us he had bought a 2 fam house in the outskirts of Hunts Point, blocks from stores, subway, trolley line. Lots of walking, but we didn't mind, walking past all the vacant lots where old Italian men would browse their goats.

Strange that such a childhood instills in you a love for the city. You esteemed the little fighting mayor who for 12 years fought those who would exploit the poor. You watched with dismay as his successors let the city be cheated, mulcted, ground down by sleazy politicians, racketeers, crooked contractors, scheming union bosses. And by respectable bankers, bond brokers, landlords, mortgage men. Then little people began to join the obscene picking on the carcass of the city - teachers, police, garbage men, transit workers - always clamor for more pay, bigger pensions with less performance and numbers swelling as they featherbedded. It was sickening and had to end in debacle.

Which it has. I watch Mayor Abe Beame struggle. An insane budget, horrendous debt, murderous interest rates. This wonderful metropolis gave more hope and opportunity to millions of poor and wretched yearning to be free, than any city in the history of the world. It reminds me of a story by Pierre Van Paassen in "Days of Our Years". It tells of a village hunchback, whose deformity makes him the butt of constant cruelty. Finally, after an awful incident in which he is tormented by a heartless crowd of men and women, he commits suicide. His sister, a simple girl who lived a sordid life in a brothel to help support him, heard the tragic story, and she too, took her life. Consternation and shame hit the village and an immense turnout came to the village church for the double funeral. At the rites, the 80-year old Abbe rose, looked at the sea of faces and then spoke. "Christians" he said, "Christians, when I go to my Maker, and He asks me where is my flock, I shall not answer. When He asks a second time, I will not reply. But, when He asks me for a third time - 'Pastor, where is your flock', I will say - Lord, I do not have a flock, they are a pack of wolves."

That is what I see today - a pack of wolves. None who relent as they tear at the innards of the city - not the bankers or the bondholders or the crooked contractors, or the landlords, or the scheming union bosses, or city employees, not one. A crying shame.