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# YORKVILLE REVISITED

by Fotine Nicholas '42

The 1970s — trendy shops, a new restaurant row, young, with-it strollers, new high-rises, light, and openness. . . .

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The 1930's — the creaky, noisy Third Avenue El, a trolley line to Washington Heights, four- and five-story tenements, working-class Europeans and their American children.

. . .This was the Yorkville whose geographical boundaries were 59th and 96th Streets from the East River to Fifth Avenue but whose true ambience lay east of Third from the middle sixties to the German eighties. It ended at the river where barges moored to rickety piers and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive had not yet been built.

In those days most Yorkvillites were of Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Irish, German, and Italian origin. There was a small Greek colony on 70th Street and an occasional synagogue was housed in a brownstone. The main religion was Roman Catholic. The various ethnic groups came together in the public schools of which P.S. 82 on 70th and First was an outstanding example. Its principal was a native of Yorkville, a former student and teacher at 82. Abraham Cohen was small, compact, handsome, immaculate, and a smart dresser.

We students loved 82 — its dress code, its formality, the school song, the orchestra, the teams, and most of our teachers. Mr. Cohen believed in motivation. The weekly honor roll rewarded students for improvement in conduct as well as good scholarship. The best students had the dubious (by today's standards) honor of using the teachers' entrance and dusting the principal's office every morning. Our patriotic uniform, white middies, red

scarfs, navy skirts for the girls, and white shirts with navy ties for the boys, was modified at the bi-weekly assemblies by pleated white skirts. We all looked more or less alike, except for a certain pink-cheeked teacher's pet whose clothes had a little more style, and Alvin, the local haberdasher's son, who was rumored to change his shirt twice a day.

One's final average was always better than at midterm because of the "hygiene" test on which almost everyone got 100%. Once a term Mr. Cohen personally inspected every student. He gave points for neat hair, clean nails, polished shoes, a white handkerchief, and a toothbrush (new) and toothpaste (unopened) in one's pocket.

Another annual tradition was Spring Cleaning Day when we all brought in soap, rags, furniture polish, and sandpaper. On every floor the sliding doors between the classrooms were rolled back, and to the sound of "Rustle of Spring" on the piano we scraped and scrubbed and polished the school furniture.

Along with love of school and the emphasis on cleanliness came godliness and patriotism. Twice weekly Mr. Cohen read from the Old Testament. He would sometimes comb his thick dark hair in assembly to show us how the Greeks had behaved before going into battle at Thermopylae.

In those pre-McCarthy days no one worried about a certain line in the school song which said, "Hark the call, Comrades, 82 is calling." The song, which alumni still sing when they meet, had been written by the talented Mr. Rescorl, who taught music and geography and conducted the school orchestra.

With a few exceptions, like the cruel Miss C, who hated teaching "all those little foreigners," and Miss A, who had the habit of slapping students' faces, and Miss M, who washed her money including dollar bills, the teachers were a joy. But every Eden must have its serpent and ours was the assistant principal, Miss Jacobs. Gaunt and hatchet-faced, with straggly grey hair piled on top of her head, she had a sharp chin and a wart on her cheek. We were convinced that her clothes were relics of the Civil War: her skirts swept the floor, her dark shirtwaists puffed out around her waist where her bosom lay, and she wore high-laced shoes.

Miss Jacobs's eyes that glared through slits, her bony finger that pointed like a gun, and her raspy voice immobilized us. Her hatred of children extended even to our names, which she changed arbitrarily. Jaroslav became Jerry, Philomena was known as Fanny, and Irmgard became Irma. We feared and hated her, but she could never make us hate our school.

In those pre-television days the local movie houses were all-important. The most elegant was "Loweeze" 72nd. Its huge, velvety blue ceiling, studded with stars, was very restful, especially if you were sitting in the balcony. But Loew's charged a quarter, which often sent us to the cheaper 72nd Street Playhouse (now back to its original name) or the Monroe on First Avenue (currently a CBS-TV studio) or the Annex, popularly known as the "Itch" (now an off-Broadway theater).

Throughout the Depression a tiny building on First Avenue featured revivals of silent movies. Admission was ten cents and on rainy Sunday evenings there was standing room only. The other small theaters offered the usual enticements of free dishes and five dollar lotteries.

In those days hardly anyone owned a car, so the streets and sidewalks were available for stickball and "potsy" (New Yorkese for hopscotch). Under the Second Avenue El that ran south to Bloomingdale's and continued east over the bridge to Astoria, the streets were lined with pushcarts. The trolley on First Avenue was just as slow and shaky as the one on Third. It was far more pleasant traveling by Fifth Avenue bus where the fare was a dime instead of a nickel and a uniformed conductor collected the money. Most passengers of that line were well-dressed and very "American" in our eyes.

These Americans usually lived west of "Irish" Third Avenue. We referred to them as "richbuggers" and enjoyed ringing the doorbells of their townhouses on our way to Central Park. The park was a place for fishing for guppies with a safety pin or ice-skating on the frozen lake in the winter. After the park we spent entire afternoons tiptoeing among the mummies at the Metropolitan or attending the free movies at the Museum of Natural History.

There was a middle-aged lady named Boetger who earned a precarious living taking the younger children to the park. She charged twenty-five cents per family. On good Saturdays she was able to round up quite a few youngsters. It was understood that she would share their lunches.

There were others who came and went. The Board of Education used to send a young woman to give free English lessons to prospective citizens. Her housewife students would ply her with homebaked goodies and an occasional gift. I had a friend from the Bronx who still recalls her surprise at another of our transients, the "liver man." Smiling and huge of nose, his tanned skin the color of the liver he sold, he usually appeared on Saturday afternoons bearing packages of steaming-fresh lamb's liver. Each liver cost twenty-five cents, and when he had a surplus, he would sell two for the price of one. Though he came around for years, we never learned his name. He was an Italian; his best customers were Greeks and Italians.

Periodically, itinerant linemen

would come through the backyards shouting "L-I-N-E-man" in a nasal voice. For a dollar or less, depending on how thirsty they were, they would climb as high as five storys to attach a clothesline. Miraculously we never lost a lineman no matter how strong the fumes of alcohol that came from him.

Since most apartments had dining rooms or large kitchens, the tablecloth man was very popular. His tablecloths were of imitation lace and very durable. A huge cloth and a dozen napkins that my mother bought from him for five dollars lasted forty years.

Tony the iceman was chubby and affable. His English consisted of "Hello. Nice-a day. 'Ow much ice today?" You could also leave your order on a block of paper at his basement door, but you could not call him because he had no phone.

All shopping was done at small stores or from the pushcarts that moved into the huge Second Avenue indoor market during LaGuardia's administration. For the best braided bread you went to Hajek's Czechoslovak bakery. There were family-run German pork stores and Hungarian spice shops. The Greek-Italian grocery on Second had open barrels of rice and olives and imported cheeses. The Jewish tailor hand-pressed everything. There was a Slavic bookstore and a Slovak jeweler, and in 1934 a group of Czechoslovaks founded the Fourth Federal Savings and Loan and ran it like a family enterprise.

One's social life was also ethnically oriented. At the Sokol generations of tow-headed youngsters got the intensive gymnastics training that the public schools did not offer. Various national groups used to hire the Czechoslovak National Hall for their wedding and christening parties.

Yorkville was very safe. Halloween was considered somewhat dangerous because the tougher boys went around hitting young passersby with flour-filled stockings. We had never heard of "trick or treat," but on Thanksgiving Eve children paraded around in Pilgrim costumes begging for "a penny for Thanksgiving."

May Day was another important day when the people from Czechoslovakia marched through the neighborhood—children and sturdy women in elaborate old-country dresses marking time to the rhythms of an old-country band. And every year the schools had a Maypole Dance in the park. In the springtime too, public school children were allowed to cultivate tiny plots of land in the Rockefeller Gardens on York Avenue. One year I raised a crop of radishes.

On summer evenings the brownstone stoops were crowded with landlords and tenants escaping from the humid apartments. In the garden behind our house on 74th Street was a fig tree that produced a few wizened but luscious figs every year. Most often it was the Italians who were resident landlords. They grew flowers and vegetables in their backyard gardens and, as winter approached, wrapped their more fragile trees in layers of coverings. In those days today's garden apartments were the least desirable. The one in our building was rented to twin brothers. In later years, one became a physician and the other a producer of X-rated movies.

When the humidity became excessive, mothers would take their children to the East River to sit on the benches or the wooden embankments. The up-and-down movement of the moored barges and the freshness of the sea-borne breezes were relaxing and refreshing.

The more courageous among us children used to visit a deserted frame house in Carl Schurz Park. Its door was never locked, and we could walk freely about the empty but still stately old mansion that was a part of America's past—our past by adoption. We never dreamt that one day Gracie Mansion would be home to the mayors of New York.

It was a happy time for most of us, but at the height of the Depression we noticed things that puzzled and saddened us. We often saw people's furniture piled on the sidewalks for days at a time. That was how we learned the word "eviction." Another new expression was "bank failure" which was somehow connected with the lines of unshaven, tired-looking men waiting for a bank to reopen. On a Sunday afternoon stroll through Central Park, my sisters and I stared in fascination at gaunt men who were warming their hands at makeshift fires in front of ramshackle huts. It was years later that we learned the word "Hoovervilles."

Although the railroad flats and brownstone apartments of Yorkville were palatial compared to the Hoovervilles, many families were still sharing hall toilets and bathing in their kitchen tubs. Those of us who lived in steamheated apartments were considered affluent.

World War II and the razing of the Third Avenue El in the 1950s accelerated the changes that were inevitable. Most of the oldtimers of Yorkville are gone. The few survivors are still being displaced by a new kind of immigrant from the many other communities of America. Some ethnic businesses have survived in new forms and some houses of worship serve their old parishioners. But the new Yorkville is best symbolized perhaps by Theater 73, once the home of Bohemian National Hall and now the birthplace of "Ain't Misbehavin'," and the Jan Hus Church auditorium, where air raid wardens held meetings during World War II and which is now the site of a weekly flea market.

Farewell, old Yorkville, European yet eminently American, of the twentieth century but as vanished as Atlantis.