

A hometown reverie – a day in Borough Park

My childhood neighborhood has changed completely – and I like it. It is like entering a live story by a great Yiddish writer.



Borough

Park

by Phyllis Chesler

Once Manhattan lost the Automat, Schrafft's, Chock full o' Nuts, Ratner's, the Carnegie Deli, and the Peacock Caffe on West 4th Street in Greenwich Village—not to mention the old Metropolitan Opera House—I realized that places that should have remained, even been landmarked, could just as silently slip away.

But what about Cafe des Artistes, the Oak Room at the Plaza, and Cafe Nicholson—gone, all gone, and they disappeared long

before Covid. However, that epidemic did lead to the closing of Gem Spa (!), on St Mark's Place, where they made their world-famous egg creams, Chumley's, and Beyoglou, all places with which I am personally familiar.

Sutter's Bakery is long gone but I miss it still. I do not feel the same about the Women's House of Detention and which once housed Angela Davis, Dorothy Day, Andrea Dworkin, Ethel Rosenberg, and Afeni Shakur. I knew two of these women, marched outside for a third, and was friendly with the niece of a fourth inmate. My beloved literary agent, Elaine Markson, had an office on Greenwich Street, very nearby.

Perhaps in search of some permanence, my feet on ever-shifting sands, I recently decided to visit my childhood home in Boro/Borough Park. I was ever so slightly disoriented by what I found.

When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, Orthodox Jews, *modern* Orthodox Jews, lived there among Italian Catholics. I knew one Protestant. My best friends on the block were an Italian Catholic and an African-American. There were grand synagogues, a few small shtieblach, (small, private shuls), one right down the block from where we lived.

Now, there are shtieblach on almost every block, sometimes two. And the old hood is mainly populated by at least twelve or thirteen different hassidic sects such as Bobov, Belz, Ger, Satmar, Vizhnitz, Skver, etc.

Many of the men on the street wore visible tzitzis and side locks; many more also wore hats and frock coats. Most of the women wore midi skirts, pushed strollers, and were accompanied by young children. For a moment—blink!—and you might think you were in Jerusalem or somewhere in Eastern Europe in the 19th century.

I liked it, I was in no way put off by any of this—it was as if I'd entered a dream or a long-lost story by a great Yiddish

writer—but it was certainly different than what I knew growing up.

However, in terms of buildings, restaurants, stores, there was nothing—or at least almost nothing that was still there. The exceptions were the two synagogues where my father (z"l) prayed: First Congregation Anshe Sfard and Temple Bet El where the great chazan, Moshe Koussevitsky, held the congregation in thrall. Yes, I was privileged to have heard him, but there was no way I could have appreciated him.

Happiness! The two synagogues still stand, I recognized them at once, although they now seemed a bit smaller than they had appeared to me in childhood —and as I remembered them; my public school, P.S. 164, also still stands on the corner of 43rd St. and 14th Ave—but it is now also called the Caesar Rodney School. My mother (z"l) used to walk down the block, meet me in the schoolyard, and either bring me home for lunch or deliver a freshly made sandwich, fruit, and juice.

What else remains: All the large brick apartment buildings which can still house so many families. No need to tear them down.

Otherwise, I could not find a single candy store, (they once also called them luncheonettes, and they sold stationery, cigars, toys, and sometimes offered fountain service). What happened to all the grocery stores, drug stores, shoe repair shops, movie theaters, barber shops, and bakeries that I knew so well? There *are* many bakeries, also grocery stores, at least one on every block, sometimes two, but none that were familiar to me.

Where did the chicken market go? And the outdoor barrels of sour pickles? Near the corner of the block where I grew up, there was once a shoe repair shop. I dropped shoes off there for my family. A drug store stood on the corner. There was a barber shop on 14th Avenue which my father patronized—and the

Windsor movie theater where I saw my first-ever movies: *Fantasia* and *The Red Shoes*.

Where did they go? For that matter: Where did the Normandy Movie theater under the El disappear to—and the delicatessen also under the El?

And what ever happened to the Workman's Circle which occupied a large building in the immediate neighborhood? And to the Envoy, a vegetarian restaurant on Thirteenth Avenue where my mother sometimes ordered a vegetarian cutlet? Or the Famous, once the "best" restaurant in the hood? What about Norman and Fred where I got my hair cut—and the Rainbow Shop? Probably long gone.

My official tour began at my three story family home on 56rd St where I spent my first seventeen years. It was completely unrecognizable. I remember it as more wooden than brick and it had housed four very small apartments which one entered through the kitchen. We lived in one apartment, I had a charming bedroom with eaves on the third floor, my brothers each had rooms on that floor and my grandparents lived right across the hall in the other upstairs apartment. In good weather, my grandmother Gittel (z"l) spent her days sitting on the porch, sipping tea with a piece of sugar between her teeth and slipping me forbidden candies from a pocket deep in her flowered housedress.

How these impoverished immigrants ever managed to move from the lower East Side and buy—actually buy—a home in Boro Park defeats even my imagination. My grandmother Gittl once worked as a chambermaid on the ocean liners from Europe to America and back—and when I knew her, she was disabled. My grandfather Natan worked on and off as a "presser." Based on precious photographs, he used to be a hassid of some kind in Premyslani but in the New World, he felt that he had to fit in, look modern, and so he did.

Now? My childhood home seems to be a one family home, made of brick, without a proper, neighborly stoop at street level and without an upstairs porch. Some other newly bricked houses on the block have retained an upstairs porch. Right next door, is a shtiebel, Kahal Bet David.

Further down 43rd St was the Talmud Torah I once attended. Hassids in black frock coats stood outside the much revamped building which is now a Rabbinical College. They looked a bit frightened when two "elderly" ladies got out of the car and stared and lingered quite a bit. I wanted to tell them, in my Golda Meir-like American accented Hebrew, that I had once studied there at the Machzike Talmud Torah, but decided that they probably spoke Yiddish—and mine is more than a bit rusty.

I went to visit my Talmud Torah's second home. It was once co-ed. Now, it is the Karfunkel and Pearl Bodner Educational Center for Ha' Bonos, the daughters, as well as Beth Jacob of Boro Park—and the Elbogen Building.

We drove slowly down the length of Thirteenth Avenue (there is no other way to drive given the constant, even massive traffic there). I once haunted Eichler's for books—it has expanded, and gone is the friendly glass window with entrancing books. Eichler's is now a huge brick building, and advertises itself, accurately, as the "Home Depot of Judaica." They sell yarmulkes, tzitzis, mezuzahs, kosher cookbooks, Jewish music, holy books, what appears to be simplified books for children, etc.

Onward to my family's second home, one they bought when I was about to leave for college. It, too, is all different. Once it was a two story, two family home and still seems to be but it no longer has the wonderful wrap-around porch, no small front yard filled with hydrangea bushes, no drive-way, and no garage where my parents parked the car.

It lives—all of it—but only in my memory. Thomas Wolfe, in his

book, *You Can't Go Home Again*, has his American-born writer-narrator conclude:

"You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood ... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting, but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory."

I am not sure what Wolfe meant by the "escapes of Time and Memory" but I'd put it this way: Everything changes, almost nothing remains the same—except for the Eternal One.

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