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*A Boy from the Bronx: A Recollection*

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Arline Alda's "*Just Kids from the Bronx*" enticed me to recollect the first 20 years of my life.<sup>1</sup> The personal stories of her friends and those of her husband Alan Alda of childhoods spent in Bronx apartment houses and public schools described the rich lives of European immigrants first to the city and their spread to the outer borough of the Bronx with their farms and parks and unimproved acres. Her 19-year old brother Adolph came from New York to shepherd us across the Atlantic on the *SS George Washington*. We joined my mother's families the Gottliebs and the Lowenthals in a cluster of apartment houses on Fifth Avenue just north of Central Park. The park, bicycle paths, lake and boat pond were our playgrounds.

After my father received the New York State license to practice medicine, my parents travelled along the newly developed Pelham Bay Park elevated train line, along the southeast corridor of the Bronx, stopping at one exit after another, walking the streets near each station, seeking an apartment suitable for a doctor's office. A five story apartment building at 1201 Elder Avenue just 50 yards from the elevated train station offered a six room ground floor apartment. The corner store was a pharmacy and soda fountain and a luncheonette with newspapers and magazines on the other side.<sup>2</sup> The dual track train stood on steel columns along Westchester Avenue, over trolley car tracks that offered a busy and noisy transportation hub.

Multi-story brick houses with honey locust trees filled the avenue. PS 77 elementary school<sup>3</sup> was two streets to the North and East on 172 Street and Ward Avenue, with the James Monroe High School just one street to the North. My parents joined the reformed synagogue on

Elder Avenue and 172 Street.<sup>4</sup> This enclave became a vibrant Jewish community that sustained my father's practice. Other practitioners settled in the neighboring streets and the need for hospital facilities led community physicians to establish the two-story Hunts Point Hospital and then a few years later a much larger Bronx Hospital, both offering facilities for practitioners to treat their patients.<sup>5</sup>

My mother's brother Max Lowenthal established his office and home on Washington Avenue, a few streets from the Bronx Hospital. His home was on a large lot offering a playground for our family visits. His oldest son Charles was a Scoutmaster and both my brother and I were active Boy Scouts.

In time my parents rented an apartment (#3) in the same building as our home. Melvin and Ruth Muroff, lifelong friends lived in Apartment #2. (Apartment #4 was the office of our dentist Dr. Heyman.)

In 1928, my father's mother Dvora Grunwerg migrated and was established in Apartment #5. She occupied the first two rooms leaving the large living room with windows facing the elevated railroad as a play area for my brother Sidney and myself. We adapted to the screeching brakes of train halts and noises of the doors and motors every few minutes, day and night. The living room was our playground, with Lionel electric trains on the floor, chemical experiments, chess and marble games on tables. My grandmother adhered to orthodox Jewish practices and tolerated our noises and arguments.

My father's office windows faced the street. Although Elder Avenue was lightly travelled, my friends and I were admonished to keep the noise levels low. My father parked his car in front of the building entrance, a notice that he was in his office. His open "office hours"

were 12 to 1 and 6 to 8 each day. My brother and I were expected to join him for dinner each day at 5:30.

The office telephone was monitored at all times so early in my life I learned to answer the ring with "Dr. Fink's office" and record the messages. When my father went to a movie house or a play or opera in the city, he sought an aisle seat after notifying the usher that he was available for calls.

I had a mutt dog called Pal. He developed seizures, often vomited, and more often whimpered and cried for long periods. My father had various medications in his office and I soon learned that the pink capsule (secobarbital, Seconal) would quiet Pal nicely. One night, when my parents were at a movie house, Pal was very upset. I fed him two capsules and went back to reading and listening to radio music. Not hearing from Pal, I found him under the dining room table, unconscious and not responding. Panicked, I called my father and blurted that he should come home quickly for an emergency. After a hurried drive through the broad streets of Southern Boulevard, over the trolley tracks, he rushed in and when I showed him the "dead" dog, he listened and examined and opined that the dog would soon recover. My chagrin was an early lesson in the need for examination before ringing a panic button.

During the financial depression of the 1930s a barter system was in place. I was often sent to the grocer, butcher and fish shops, pharmacy and laundry, bringing home packages after my mother had called. I rarely needed cash money except to use the train or trolley systems.

By 1936 the developing Spanish Civil War and the anti-Jewish restrictions in Germany became daily family concerns as my parents sought to bring Jewish relatives and school classmates to America. To obtain a visa the immigrants needed evidence that they would not

become wards of the government. My parents established bank accounts in the names of each of the relatives with a joint owner, often using me as the citizen.<sup>6</sup>

PS 77 and the James Monroe High School were well regulated. Boys wore white shirts and dark shorts or knickerbocker pants (knickers) clustered just below the knee; girls wore white midi-blouses and dark skirts. While the halls were noisy between classes, hall “monitors” maintained order. Being a “monitor” was an “honor” and despite my small size, I was an active hall monitor.

Desks bound to the floor filled classrooms. I was short and usually sat up front and did not realize until I took eye tests for a driver’s license at age 16 that I was near-sighted. My first pair of glasses were a revelation.

I surely was a “nerd” and in the practice of the time I skipped grades four times, graduating from elementary school at age 12. I qualified for the prestigious Manhattan high schools, but my parents refused permission saying that the James Monroe High School was just four streets away and required no travel.

The school had four program “tracks” and I was soon established as college bound on the academic track. I studied German to meet the language requirement and became an editor of the monthly *Plaudermäulchen* (“chatterbox”) and wrote each issue’s crossword puzzle.

I was favored by Ms. Sweet, teacher of English literature and head of the Arista, the honorary academic society. Tall and lean, always well dressed, she was an enthusiastic reader of murder mysteries, sharing them with students. When she learned that I wanted to go to medical school, she sent me to the coach of the football team, Mr. Wiedman who offered me a position as a “team manager.” I kept records of the games, team equipment, medical supplies, and monitored travel arrangements for off-site games. At the end of the game season I arranged a team dinner,

once at a New York City restaurant on Times Square. At the school graduation I was awarded an athletic letter **M**, a note in my college application that may have supported my college admission as a “well rounded student.”

I graduated high school in January 1939 at age 16 and enrolled in New York University's College at its Bronx campus for its Feb-Sep program.<sup>7</sup> I lived at home and used the trolley line to come to school. By the second year I established myself as a library assistant in the Gould Memorial Library and a research fellow in the biology programs under Carl Sandstrom and Horace W. Stunkard.<sup>8</sup> I soon found niches in the Library and Biology Buildings in which I could leave a cot and some clothes and I often remained on campus for days on end.

As an editor of the *Heights Daily News*, the college's 4 to 8 page newspaper, I spent a night each week at the printshop in Fort Lee, New Jersey, editing page proofs and setting type for headlines. I wrote stories of campus events and visiting lectures.

The aroma of print ink settled in my clothes and led me to work from time to time in the art book multi-color print shop of Martin Jahoda. Martin was émigré relative of my father's medical school classmate Julius Halpern who fled Vienna with his wife Frieda and daughter Eva on March 12, 1938 (the day that Hitler was welcomed into Vienna). The family lived nearby on Elder Avenue as he studied for the New York State medical licensing examinations. I coached him in English and as a gift he gave me a Leica camera that was compact and easily fit my trouser's pocket. I used it throughout my medical school career.

My parents moved their home to Pelham Manor at 528 Manor Ridge Road before WW II. I did not live at that home. My parents had supported the Elder Avenue Synagogue and they led the organization of the Pelham Jewish Center in their village. It took many years of effort to overcome the community's restrictive covenants against Jews and blacks, the prevailing Nimby

attitude of Westchester County communities at the time. The Center and Synagogue opened on the Esplanade in 1953.

My brother Sidney was born in 1927. He followed the same trajectory in the same public schools that I attended. He graduated Columbia College in 1948 and Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons for his medical degree in 1952. His residency training in medicine at Montefiore Hospital was followed by years of research as a Damon Runyon Fellow. He specialized in gastroenterology and by 1959 he left the Bronx for a career in community practice.<sup>9</sup>

I recall our Victrola, a large mahogany box that played 10- and 12-inch vinyl records. My parents and then I collected records, mostly symphonic and operatic. My parents had been well versed in opera during their education in Vienna. Radio music dominated our living room as we avidly followed the news, hours of symphonic and operatic music, and the stories of *Manchu the Magician*, *the Lone Ranger* and *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy* and other "soap operas" for boys.

What else do I recall of my experience in the Bronx? During childhood, cars and trucks were few, much if not most traffic was horse-drawn wagons, leaving manure on the streets. White-clothed Sanitation sweepers kept the streets clean; but we were accustomed to playing ball in littered streets.

The Bronx River flowed three streets west of Elder Avenue. "The mud flats" of its banks, the Morrisania Farms with milk cows and chickens just to the north. The Bronx Zoological and Botanical Parks a quarter mile north, well within walking distances, were our playgrounds. We played stickball, practiced skills with marbles (*immies*, *steelies*, *aggies*), tossed and collected Goudey Indian and World War I Air Ace Cards, and built carts using 4-wheel

roller skates. On week-end afternoons we took the train to New York City to visit the Museum of Natural History with its dioramas and Saturday afternoon films like *Nanook of the North* and the conquest of the North and South Poles by Admiral Peary and Roald Amundsen. I learned to swim at the Castle Hill pools and ride horses at Pelham Bay Park.

Speaking of Indian cards, in 1990 my daughter Linda was teaching at Middlebury College. She and Martha went on a shopping trip leaving me to wander US Route 7 alone. A bookshop showcase contained Goudey Indian Cards of 1936 vintage. Nostalgia led me to buy three for \$5. For the next decade I bought, bartered, and exchanged cards at ephemera shows until I had a full set of 216 cards in good to excellent condition. These have been a prize collection in my library and are now at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry in Portland.

I received my letter of admission to New York University Medical School on December 6, 1941 the day before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That summer I began my studies at Bellevue Hospital and was inducted into the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) for my medical school years. Because Bellevue faculty made up one of the Hospitals sent overseas, we were taught by a very junior faculty. I participated in many research protocols and was encouraged to undertake procedures as obtaining blood and spinal fluid, set fractures, deliver babies, and do minor surgery.

On graduation in June 1945 I started an internship at Morrisania City Hospital in the Bronx. In April 1946 I went on active military duty, was trained in neuropsychiatry at the Army School of Military Neuropsychiatry in San Antonio and served 20 months stateside. At age 24, I was suddenly discharged in November 1947 with the end of the war and troop demobilization. Having been in school continuously since childhood I elected to spend the next six months as a ship's Surgeon on the Grace and American Export Lines. On a Grace Line cruise to South

America I met Bertie and Harry Gross of Great Neck, and met their daughter Martha when we returned at the end of the cruise to Pier 57 in NYC. We began our courtship and Martha and I married in September 11, 1949 after her graduation from Barnard College in June.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout medical school days I lived at Elder Avenue, often taking the subway to the school.

My internship at Morrisania City Hospital from July 1945 to June 1946 and my residencies at Montefiore and Bellevue Hospitals kept me within the borough. On January 2, 1952 I joined the staff of Hillside Hospital on the eastern edge of Queens. I had already established a base at Martha's parents home in Great Neck in 1949 and thereafter my connection to the Bronx was limited to visits to my father's Elder Avenue office until his death in 1965 at age 67.

My mother Bronia was my father's assistant when he opened his office. After my brother and I spent our days in school my mother took part in community services, especially during the war years. She organized a storefront child care center on Elder Avenue, nurtured it to become an affiliate of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. She developed centers at Clason Point and then at Bronx River Housing. During the war years she was chairwoman of the local rationing board. She was a well known community leader.

Bronia's medical education was interrupted by my birth during her fourth year at the University of Vienna. After the war, when Sidney and I were well along in our schooling she sought to enroll in a New York City medical school to continue her medical education, but was refused admission. With her experience as a community leader, she turned to training in social work, graduating from the Columbia University School of Social Work in 1956. Thereafter she worked at the Lenox Hill Hospital until retired by age at 65 (1967); then at the Brandywine Nursing Home where she worked for an additional 12 years,

My uncle Max Lowenthal had three children. His daughter Irma was very close to my mother and after her children were grown, she too was active in Bronx projects. She married a physician Henry Fleck. She was born in Poland in 1919, emigrated in 1921, and died in 2004 at age 84. Her obituary describes her extensive efforts in enhancing Bronx culture.<sup>11</sup>

Our families were educated and nurtured in the Bronx. It was a happy environment with little to anticipate the riots and burnings and the white flight of the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> During the years of the economic depression, a barter economy and volunteer community efforts encouraged child care and welfare for the poor. It was a nurturing community.

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<sup>1</sup> Alda, Arline. *Just Kids from the Bronx*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The luncheonette was managed by the Muroffs who were lived next door neighbors. Their son Melvin, 2 years older than I, became a lifelong close friend. A graduate of the Menninger Foundation Institute in Topeka, he later practiced clinical psychology in Scarsdale, New York. He and his wife Blanche were loyal friends and supporters of my research as members of the Board of the International Association for Psychiatric Research.

<sup>3</sup> Now redesignated Public Schools 195 and 196, at the junction of Ward Avenue and 172 Street.

<sup>4</sup> My brother and I obtained our Jewish education and celebrated our Bar Mitzvahs at this center.

<sup>5</sup> By 2015 neither hospital, nor the Morrisania City Hospital were still to be found.

<sup>6</sup> My parents became citizens in 1928, and I was designated as a citizen at the same time.

<sup>7</sup> For students who completed high school admission in February an intensive summer program allowed students to join the sophomore class in September.

<sup>8</sup> My research problem was to study the impact of light and darkness on the mitosis diurnal cycle in the ependymal layer of the 48 to 72 hour chick. Others had studied th 24 to 48 and 72 to 96 hour cycles. We found no changes in mitosis rates.

<sup>9</sup> After a period of research at Montefiore Sidney began a clinical practice in Paterson, New Jersey with a group headed by Irving Selikoff, an eminent researcher in pulmonary diseases,. He moved to an academi position in Chicago, then at the Veterans Hospital in Providence. He married Eleonor Engelman, a student at Barnard College. They had 3 children Michael (now in Chicago working for more than 25 years as an analyst at United Air Lines); Deena on the faculty in Mathematics and Computer Science at New York University's Courant Institute; and Bert, a publicist for Rogers & Hammerstein Music studios. While in Providence Ellie died; Sidney joined the US Air Force as medical officer, where he met and married nurse Nesta Hignett, moved to the Veterans Hospital in Hampton VA. After her death he retired to Hampton community.

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<sup>10</sup> Martha died suddenly on March 31, 2016. Her ashes are under a Japanese Cherry tree on our lawn in Nissequogue. We had been happily married for 67 years. We have 3 children born between 1951 and 1958. Jonathan is Professor and VP for Research at Portland State University; Rachel is Professor of Biology at Mount Holyoke College, and Linda is Professor of Ecology at Sweet Briar College.

Jon married Nina DeLange in Phoenix and they have a daughter Laurel and a son Andrew. Laurel graduated Arizona State University and obtained the Master's degree at the University in Brisbane, Australia. Andrew is completing his sophomore year at University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

Rachel married Tom Dennis, a Professor of Astronomy/Physics and has Rose Dennis who graduated Mt Holyoke College on May 15, 2016 and Hieu Dennis who is completing his 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Union College.

Linda married the Monarch Butterfly scientist Lincoln Brower who taught her during her career at Amherst College. They do not have children.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/26/nyregion/irma-fleck-84-who-battled-decay-in-the-bronx-is-dead.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/26/nyregion/irma-fleck-84-who-battled-decay-in-the-bronx-is-dead.html?_r=0);  
<http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1971/01/12/83198899.html?pageNumber=26>;  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/17/opinion/1-a-way-for-hay-fever-victims-to-fight-back-763486.html>;  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/07/opinion/1-violence-of-old-men-vs-the-idealism-of-youth-what-tocqueville-said-279689.html>

<sup>12</sup> Mahler J. *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning: 1977, Baseball, Politics, and the Battle for the Soul of a City*. NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2006.

## **Appendix 2: The Forgotten Merits of Diagnostic Tests**