

You Can't Go Home Again

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Around a decade ago, I called my father to tell him that my wife and I were moving from Manhattan to Brooklyn. His response was interesting: “Over my dead body,” he said. He was joking, I think, and assumed that I was too. Discovering that I was in fact serious, he fell into a bewildered silence.

“Dad,” I explained. “Brooklyn’s different now.”

But he seemed neither to believe me nor to be comforted by my optimism. Perhaps this was because he was speaking from his lovely home in Los Angeles, where the sun was shining and depression is generally considered a state of the mind, rather than of the wallet. Or perhaps his reaction to my news had nothing at all to do with where he found himself then, but rather with where he’d once been, long ago. For my father, my moving to Brooklyn was inevitably personal: he’d grown up in Brownsville, a tough, insular, Jewish working-class community that stood lower on the socioeconomic pecking order than even the Lower East Side.

Brownsville: the name conjures its history, the opposite of brightness. Though the place was named not for the drab color but for a real estate speculator, Charles Brown, a would-be Trump of his day, who, in 1861, purchased a large parcel of land out on the jagged eastern edge of Brooklyn, and started building shacks in the hope of attracting Jews from Manhattan. The shacks became tenements, and the Jews – “middle-class” Jews, who were poor, and “poor” Jews, who were still poorer – came to live in them. Industry, or some simulacrum of it, soon followed, and by the turn of the century Brownsville was home to the largest concentration of Jews – mostly refugees and immigrants from Eastern Europe – in the United States. *Brunzvil*, the

old people called it in the Yiddish they'd brought from their homelands, and for them and their children it remained forever a place out on the eastern reaches, far in mind, if not in literal miles, from "the city" that was New York and, it seemed then, America.

My father's house was on Ralph Avenue between Eastern Parkway and St. John's Place. My grandfather was an insurance broker and self-employed lawyer – which left them still poor, but a half-step up the economic ladder from the families of the house painters, carpenters, plasterers, and bricklayers who used to gather daily on the corners along Pitkin Avenue to talk jobs and union gossip in the hotly politicized years of the thirties. Socialism was in the air. No one had any money – not the Jews, and not the Italians or the Irish who, hungry for work too, congregated on their own streetcorners just a few blocks away. Ethnicity was their difference, but also what they shared. There was violence, of course, but generally it was local to each group; the Jews of Brownsville could lay claim to Louis Lepke and Abe Reles, those infamous mobsters of Murder Inc., and, considerably lower down the food chain, to the Amboy Dukes gang. The less fierce of the Jewish kids in the neighborhood had "clubs" – for a while, my father was president of the Cherokees – whose rag-tag members spent their days playing baseball and punchball for sums of money which, however paltry, always seemed worth fighting for.

My father's unhappiness as a kid in Brownsville, like all childhood unhappiness everywhere, had its particular roots. While he was president of the Cherokees, the boys used to hold their club meetings in the dank, unfinished basement of his house. He was their leader – until, one day, he decided that for the Cherokees to play ball against a rival club that had soundly beaten them before was a form of economic suicide; they were playing for money, and they were sure to lose. A born pessimist, he wanted no part of it. But his fellow club members were more optimistic and wanted

to play. My father would not relent, which led to a fistfight and, more or less immediately, to his becoming something of a social pariah, an exile in his own land. Which only shows, among other things, that there is more than one variety of poverty in the world – or, for that matter, in a neighborhood. By the time he was a teenager, my father had bitterly tasted a couple of them.

All this was a very long time ago, of course. But talking with my dad about those days, the past inevitably becomes present, a kind of haunting; even in sunny Los Angeles, he carries Brownsville with him.

In 1948, when he was fifteen, his family moved to a house in Jamaica, Queens. For Brownsville Jews of my grandparents' generation, this was the great leap forward. Prosperity had trickled down from the war, and given the opportunity, one family after another tore up roots and fled East Brooklyn. In their wake, they left already run-down tenements that would be filled by those poorer than themselves. These new immigrants – blacks from the American South and the Caribbean islands, Hispanics from Puerto Rico and Central America – would form the underprivileged and unseen army that would occupy the vast municipal housing projects of the urban social experiments of the next three decades, as Brownsville inexorably died.

But that death was not my father's story. My father's story, in 1948, was Queens, and the best thing about Queens was that it wasn't Brooklyn. It was a stepping stone, a weigh station: next stop, somewhere else. The only goal my father can remember from that time was to keep going. Which he did – eventually attending Yale Law School on a scholarship, marrying a beautiful blond whose own childhood had glamorously been spent in foreign countries, and raising his kids in a large comfortable apartment on the Upper East Side. Was there ever a place more remote from Brownsville than the Upper East Side? From my father's perspective, still after all those years, he'd gotten us *out* – a reverse exodus of heroic proportions, mixed with dashes of startling good luck – and the idea that a son of his would choose to live in

the Old Country, where he'd been poor and miserable, was something he couldn't quite fathom or accept.

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Before we said goodbye on the phone that day, he asked me if I'd ever read *A Walker in the City*, Alfred Kazin's memoir of growing up in Brownsville during the depression. I admitted that I hadn't. After all, thanks in part to my father, I'd been raised a Manhattanite to my bones. At that point, my wife and I knew hardly anything about Brooklyn except that, in the endless pursuit of more space and, we hoped, a better life, we intended to move there.

"Well, you should read it," my father urged me. "Kazin was older, but when I was growing up there it was just the way he described it. If that doesn't wise you up about Brooklyn, nothing will. Go out and get a copy."

I took his advice, and wasn't sorry I did. I have the book with me now. It was published in 1951, when its author – already an extraordinary (and largely self-taught) literary critic – was thirty-six. Here are its haunting first lines:

"Every Time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away. From the moment I step off the train at Rockaway Avenue and smell the leak out of the men's room, then the pickles from the stand just below the subway steps, an instant rage comes over me, mixed with dread and some unexpected tenderness."

Rage and dread and unexpected tenderness: Yes, I thought with a sudden jolt of recognition, he's describing my father's voice on the phone that day, talking about Brooklyn. Brooklyn understandably being for my dad Brownsville, circa 1942, say, the Brooklyn he knew and couldn't forget. (On that indelible map drawn on the inside of his eyelids one would have to include Ebbett's Field, home to the Brooklyn Dodgers; but Ebbett's Field, of course, is long gone, and the Dodgers, like my father, fled to Los Angeles.)

Kazin again:

“Every sound from the street roared and trembled at our windows – a mother feeding her child on the doorstep, the screech of the trolley cars on Rockaway Avenue, the eternal smash of a handball against the wall of our house, the clatter of *‘der italyéner’s’* cart packed with watermelons, the sing-song of the old clothes men walking Chester Street...”

By the time of the writer’s revisitiation in the late Forties, around the time my father was leaving Brownsville for good, many of the old shops that both men had known – the fruit and vegetable stands and the drygoods stores and the luggage shops – had been replaced by second-hand furniture stores, as if the old way of life were being disposed of in one great stoop sale.

What he was writing even then, it’s clear, was a eulogy, wonderfully and terribly bittersweet. Ambivalence about the history of that place and a longing for what it once had been pervade every line of the book. For men like Kazin and my father, such ambivalence was their birthright, well-earned. And what are birthrights for, if not to be passed on to one’s children?

Kazin is dead now, and my father is seventy-four. So much distance traveled; and Brownsville itself, of course, an utterly changed neighborhood racially and economically, having been killed, and then, painfully, slowly, resuscitated from its own blood and ashes.

Unlike Kazin, the walker and wanderer, my father has been back exactly twice. The first time, in 1981, following his divorce and his move to Los Angeles, he was accompanied to Brooklyn by his then-girlfriend, a California native, who, I imagine, must have been mystified and alarmed as my father – his heart beginning to hammer with the dread and rage and tenderness that Kazin had experienced thirty years before him – turned the rental car left from Eastern Parkway onto Ralph Avenue. Here was the old block: the tenement row houses made of brick, the scarred stoops and rusted fire escapes. Except that they were gone. In their place, my father later told

me, stood three crumbling, cheaply painted buildings surrounded by a city of rubble. Entire blocks of housing projects razed, burned-out, gutted. Streets on which he used to play stickball and punchball buried under mountains of trash. The neighborhood was African-American and Caribbean-American, poor beyond reckoning; and then, as he drove away from it, abruptly the streets were populated by nothing but orthodox Jews. As if everything but that invisible racial dividing line – that barrier of fear and prejudice which people, wherever they are, somehow never forget how to erect against those who are different – had failed to survive my father’s memory of the place.

And then, sixteen years later, soon after my wife and I had set up house on Hicks Street in Brooklyn, my father was in town on business, and he asked me if I would be interested in driving out with him to his old neighborhood, to see what was there. I looked at him, surprised, and said certainly, I’d be interested. I was a Brooklyn resident, after all, and Brownsville seemed not so far away as it once had.

A sunny, hot day. We drove with the windows open, car horns and exhaust flooding over us, and on the seat beside me my father looked not so much grim as anxious. We took the long route, not knowing any better: from Grand Army Plaza, we made our way far, far down Eastern Parkway; and then, finally, on Ralph Avenue, we turned left. On the block where, he told me, he’d once lived, we stopped the car and looked around. For a long time neither of us said a word. Then slowly my father shook his head.

A row of painted brick houses. The rubble around them cleared. The street not clean, but passable. Children were playing.

The block, which sixteen years earlier had appeared dead to him, was alive again.

“It’s coming back,” my father said, more to himself than to me. He seemed at once incredulous and humbled.

“I told you, Dad. Brooklyn’s different now.”

He looked at me as if he had no idea know what I was talking about. Then he nodded. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Let’s go back to your place. Let’s go home.”

John Burnham Schwartz, April 2007