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Scene One

The East Village

A reflection on place.

I'll get on with that story just ahead, and on to the other dramatic episodes of Tod's and my political work that are the primary focus of this memoir. There are, however, wider contexts to consider that prompt the occasional digressions I shall call *Scenes*. Our lives also diverged, occupied other milieus, broader than the confines of our work. There were love interests, cultural and educational pursuits, world travels, and our connections to our families and the past. And there was place, first and foremost, the East Village, the downtown New York remnant of Bohemia where Tod and I both lived, and where, after work, we loitered with our circle of friends in the local bars and restaurants, the theaters and the movies houses, at each other's pads or in some steamy Jazz club. Certainly for two American radicals there was no better scene in New York City, and, speaking for myself, no better time to live there.

I say "our lives," but this is my version of that story, and, while documented wherever possible, colored overall by my own fragmented recollections and the singular perspectives I bring to them. Tod's voice and point of view enter only in those places where he is quoted from the record and where, while writing this, I have gotten him to respond to my relentless queries or, on one or two rare occasions, to reminisce in person about our decade-long collaboration. For the private segments of my life in the early seventies, there is very little beyond memory on which to sketch an accurate and detailed account, the odd letter to remind me of a fleeting

connection or long lost friend, a few scraps from appointment calendars and notebooks, some old business cards and photographs. Not much at all.

In contrast, the public episodes are richly documented by news accounts and by a wealth of correspondence, position papers, newsletters, funding proposals, brochures and the like. And there are the ample sheaves of letters from old girlfriends, both the steadies and the flings, which record one-sided views of my love life. As factual sources these letters only tantalize, and mostly plot the heart songs and, not infrequently, the grievances of a lover still in courtship, in the language of feelings and - often - reproach. They make me long for my own end of the correspondence, undoubtedly much more *factual*. But those letters from former paramours still chastise me, and remind me of how clueless I was about relationships, how emotionally fragile and unavailable, and sometimes how dishonest and exploitative. While every letter may provide a passing glimpse of my movements in the world at a given moment throughout the Seventies, each is more a mirror that reveals how I was seen at the time by some intimate other. All in good time.

It was inevitable that I would move to the East Village after meeting Tod Ensign and Jeremy Rifkin. They both lived there then. During my first half-year in New York City I had been loath to even visit that neighborhood. I didn't think it safe. This is ironic since I'd just come back from Vietnam, where I was seldom preoccupied with concern for my own security.

It was my status as a transient, a grad student, someone drifting through. I hadn't yet decided to settle in the city. Without much effort I'd found an apartment on the West Village side of Broadway on Waverley Place near Washington Square, the virtual campus of New York University. My flat was a half block from most of my classes and from the office I rarely occupied in the linguistics department as a TA, a teaching assistant, a sinecure which added a

couple of hundred bucks to my monthly disability from the VA. I was pretty flush by student standards. Across the Square in the Student Union I read and studied for hours in my private carrel.

Most nights I'd hang with NYU friends at the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street. This was the traditional Village scene I had known since my Army days when my boyhood sweetheart Katie was living here and had turned me on to the White Horse, one of New York's premier downtown literary dives. It took about six months for me to strip away those old habits from my past and to fashion a New York life on the other, rougher side of town in the neighborhood I'd once been - literally - too cautious to walk in.

It's amazing how quickly one's opinions and attitudes can change, depending on the influences at hand and on the ambitions that bind you to them. But aesthetics in the deep sense are fused to one's being in formative years. I grew up in Babylon, suburban Long Island, where a comfortable and orderly sameness spread itself over the surfaces of daily life. I rebelled quietly against obvious forms of convention; but alienation in itself does not purge the unconscious of its deeply habituated values.

It's true that as an undergraduate, I had lived in two other cities, Washington, D.C. and Rio de Janeiro, in privileged quarters surrounded by, and insulated from, their ghettos where someone from my background did not wander casually or unescorted. That's what initially kept me out of the East Village. I identified it with the 'other,' the impenetrable ghetto, a place of foreboding, want and danger. Moving there was of a piece with all the undercurrents of change in identity and values that accompanied my adaptation to big city life, and transformed me through rapidly evolving stages from suburban to urban New Yorker.

Today the East Village is a high rent district where old time residents struggle to hang onto digs that are rent-stabilized, and multiple dwellers live in spaces once inhabited by singles. But in 1971 this was still a marginal neighborhood and rents were cheap, thus attractive to immigrants, students, artists and to all manner of eccentrics existing, voluntarily or otherwise, on the down-and-out side of the urban fringe. I picked up my first flat there when the secretary to my department head, hearing I wanted to move, told me of an available unit in her own building.

The apartment was unusually situated in a diminutive building that sat behind a traditional tenement on E. 5th Street. In this so-called *back tenement* there were two tiny flats on each of its four stories. I think mine was on the second or third floor, two rooms plus bath, a kitchen-living area looking out on the inner court, and a little square of a bedroom facing the rear of a building on E. 6th, the next street up. The rent was seventy-five dollars a month, thought way too high by some neighborhood old timers, roughly a tenth of my monthly income. What I discovered later is that some folks had rather comfortable nests in this part of town - neither Tod nor Jeremy among them - and I set out to emulate that more genteel pattern as best I could.

When I'd first met Jeremy he had a place on Avenue B, but later moved to the building next to Tod's at First Avenue and East 4th Street. Jeremy's apartments were crash pads, pure and simple; he never planned to stick around. Tod had been in the neighborhood for several years already. But he too didn't give much scope to home comforts, a fringe benefit his girlfriends always provided, and at whose places Tod spent most of his nights. After work he'd stop off at his own apartment to chill over a glass of wine and listen to some sides from his jazz collection, seldom going out before nine unless to the theater - his second passion after jazz - to catch an eight o'clock curtain.¹

An old friend from undergraduate days at Georgetown who's settled in New York helped me build a platform bed which filled my entire bedroom, but with ample space below for a chest and other storage. I would cut six inches to a foot off those posts every time I moved thereafter, and that plywood platform - framed brick shithouse strong - followed me around for the next twenty years. I furnished the place from second hand stores, and sometimes found an item in mint condition on the streets of the better neighborhoods that a resident of a high rent building had tired of and discarded. Then with a comfortable domesticity that has governed my life ever since, I settled into the neighborhood I wouldn't leave for a decade, and even then with considerable nostalgia.

I quickly became captivated by the whole neighborhood, every minute detail of this rectangular Manhattan reservation from 14th to Houston Street, and from Broadway to the East River. There was a small town aspect to the East Village with its many individual shops and specialty stores. I could chose from three delectable butchers along lower First Avenue that catered to the quarter's large Ukrainian and Polish immigrant populations, their display windows festooned with mouth watering varieties of sausage and kielbasa. I particularly recall another little market where I purchased sweet butter by the chunk and fresh eggs trucked in daily from farms in New Jersey, or so it was claimed. The fruit and vegetable stands were still Italian-owned, but the quality of the produce had slipped badly. They would recover only some years later when, virtually city-wide, these sidewalk emporia were suddenly in the hands of a new wave of immigrants from South Korea. Like their Italian predecessors two generations earlier, the Koreans now sought advancement in one of the city's traditional entry level enterprises, as my own German forebears had done in the 1840s with a grocery store in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg.²

On the corner of First Avenue at 2nd Street was the Ruby Khan one of only three “Indian” restaurants in the East Village circa 1970/71³, where, until Jeremy relocated to D.C., he and I dined out together almost every night when in town. I don’t recall Jeremy ever varying his selection, ground lamb curry - Keema - with peas. The Ruby Khan was, in fact, not Indian but East Pakistani, and a focal point in New York at that time for Bangladeshi separatism, which one became aware of by the back table full of men, always in animated conversation, but not dining.

There were several cafeteria-sized Jewish eateries, like Ratner’s and Katz’s, the latter down on Houston Street, offering a three inch thick, juicy pastrami or brisket sandwich with a side of half-done pickles that you could only find in New York or Miami. For years a trade mark sign had hung in Katz’s window. A World War II anachronism, it read, “Send a salami to your boy in the Army.” Just below Houston was Orchard Street, the entire block lined with cheap clothing outlets. I would often wander down there on a Sunday morning, not for the rag trade, but to shop at the local *Botanica*, culturally Hispanic I suppose, that carried fetish items used for religious rituals, where I stocked up on incense and votive candles for atmosphere when smoking dope or for seduction.

The East Village was sustainable then, to use the current lingo, with the convenient proximity of all the basic services, the tailors and cobblers, hardware and stationary, storefront plumbers and electricians - like my father’s father Conrad Uhl, himself a master electrician who once had his shop along Manhattan’s Westside waterfront. But my memory always returns to the true relics that were hard to place even in that anachronistic world, the dark little corner pharmacy for one on my own corner of E. 5th and First Avenue, with the vintage apothecary cabinetry and two wooden mob-film phone booths at the back of the store.

There was a smoke shop on 6th or 7th street selling only fine domestic and imported tobaccos in bulk, laid out on scales and little painted tins in the show window which was backed by thick drapery so, from the street, you couldn't see inside the store. But rarest of all was a miniature shop window in another venerable side-street tenement, its interior similarly obscured, displaying a strange variety of herb-like or mineral concoctions, maybe the frankincense and myrrh one always read of in the New Testament. All these years later I still wonder why I never went inside to learn to what purpose these exotic substances were put and to whom they might be have been sold.

For years the same street person could be seen on the sidewalk near this shop. He wore a paper grocery bag, the sides neatly folded, as a hat and was heavily robed in all weather, his face as blackened as the immigrant subjects once photographed by Jacob Riis two generations earlier who resided on the same Lower East Side. Whenever someone looked at him or passed by, the man would turn away and face the wall; he never solicited, nor would he accept a handout according to my kid sister, Maggi, who also once lived in the neighborhood. I'd go back often to walk these village streets after moving away, and for years both shops and that same sad bum remained in their places like props on a stage set. And then one day they were gone.

Marketing rounds aside, I needed no fixed purpose to wander these streets most days beyond the measure of well-being I experienced - an inexplicable wonder - just being there. I advocate for material over spiritual explanations of the human condition. When I hear someone wax on about the mysteries of life in the self-referential jargon of spirituality, I tend to think they're avoiding some deeper understanding of the way reality is organized and what is, indeed, potentially knowable. That said, walking the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side, of which the East Village - it's gentrified name of relatively recent coinage - forms a discrete section, was

as close to a spiritual event as any prior transcendent or ecstatic moments I had ever known as a youthful, practicing Catholic imbued with the unquestioning ignorance of faith. The explanation is quite simple. This was a form of time-travel, and I was communing with my ancestors.

Most of my background is German, with a quarter dose of Irish from my mother's side. According to family lore my great-grandfather Conrad Uhl, Sr. - the electrician's father - had worked as a meat cutter along Avenue A, not far from Elizabeth Street where his family lived with his wife's mother and her younger siblings. Much of the neighborhood had once been German, known as *Klein Deutschland* from at least two decades before the Civil War till late in the 19th century when waves of Jews and Italians began to occupy what was by then the city's greenhorn immigrant quarter of long standing. Years after leaving the East Village I would discover, down to the actual addresses in some cases, where both my parents' German immigrant forebears had lived among these blocks.⁴

But long before I teased that knowledge from my genealogical inquires, from the very instant I took up the habit of perambulating unhurriedly and aimlessly through these streets, I sensed a familiar presence, and came to feel at home here like no place else before or since.⁵ I was contented with my impressions then, not on the trail of family history, not needing to connect with the interiors of things beyond those exchanges that satisfied an immediate need or appetite. I never questioned or analyzed why that seemingly purposeless strolling in this threadbare urban village where I'd come to live was a source of such deep and abiding consolation and familiarity.

One thing I do know is that neither my curiosity nor my delight was heightened by the more obvious contemporary attractions of those times that made the East Village a stop on the city tour bus, the often bizarre, if studied, popular street life. In an era when the costuming and

public antics of the counter-culture demanded the continuous attention of those like me, self-cast in the role of on-looker or passer-by, one cannot pretend to have been completely oblivious or disinterested. A neutral observer might have even placed me in the same scene given my external appearance, the tie-dyed shirts and shoulder length hair. But the hippie culture was not of the essence of the place, just another phase in the chronicles of its evolving tenement pageants. For me, the ideal occasion there was always on an empty block in the quiet of a Sunday morning, and most especially on the lower non-residential end of the neighborhood among the old commercial buildings, those squat many windowed cast iron skeletons, their facades sheathed with sheets of pressed ornamental copper, mottled and green with age.

Years later I would fashion the self I created in those inner-city days a *flaneur*, Walter Benjamin's romantic branding of the urbane and purposeful idler. But in truth my moments of pure idleness during that intense period of political engagement were rare. Apart from our full load of self-generated political action and globetrotting by virtue of the Safe Return agenda, and the varied social or cultural sidebars pursued on any given evening, there were often meetings with other groups in the larger Movement, or lectures that took the form of political education. A group calling itself the IS - International Socialists - a breakaway from the Trotskyist international, was top heavy with intellectuals and their talks, aimed toward recruitment, served as introductory courses on topics of enduring interest to the Leninist Left. The lectures intrigued me; being under IS "discipline" did not.

There was also the Marxist study circle I mentioned in the letter to my Australian friend. A renegade Trotskyist, Arthur Felberbaum, rounded up the participants, including Tod, while a couple named Weiss conducted the class. Both Weisses and Arthur had once been members of the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP held the certified Trotskyist franchise in the U.S. While

it was forbidden under U.S. law to political parties to affiliate internationally, the SWP was titularly linked to the Fourth International created by Leon Trotsky from his exile home in Mexico City to rival and compete with the Communist International dominated by Stalin and the Soviets. These folks, Arthur in particular, saw their political work largely as an effort to unify the Leninist Left around a strategy they called “regroupment,” not unlike what had taken place in Italy with elements of the former communist left of the discredited Stalinist era.⁶

Arthur, who later co-founded the New York School for Marxist Education,⁷ also believed - and rightly so in my view - that all American radicals could benefit from a close and guided reading of Volume I of Karl Marx’s major work, *Das Kapital*, the only volume actually published by Marx before his death. Gathering once a week we read from our assigned text, line by line, discussed and debated its meaning. This immersion into the realm of Marxist thought, complementary to my graduate studies in Chomsky’s linguistics, and has forged an inclination I’ve nurtured over my lifetime as a reader of theory, if only as a mere dabbler, to exercise and enrich my thinking in some small measure. I can’t claim the right to call myself a Marxist in any formal sense, but I can point to no other single work beyond *Capital* that had a more immediate impact on my understanding of the world and of the potential for humans to engage and attempt to change their history.

I’m not suggesting that Tod and I had mindfully linked our Safe Return campaign to History with a capital ‘H’ or, as Karl Marx once described it, to “a conscious participation in the historical process.”⁸ Our Marxism, like the New Left’s revolutionary zeal at its best, was always more pragmatic than scientific, guided by native instincts for turning the tables on the prevailing political culture, working its own methods against it, as part of a numerous and largely non-constituted opposition. But if Marxian *man* was alienated from his true self, his social relations

debased behind the fetishistic masks of the marketplace, then, as Tod and I both felt deeply, one found the antidote to the charade of legitimacy in which society displayed itself in the affirmation that a more rational world was not beyond the powers of human potential. In the spirit of Marx we studied the past as a medium for motivating our actions in the present.

We were certainly aware that amnesties had their own history in the U.S., and had been granted on several occasions. The most sweeping being that which President Andrew Johnson proclaimed at the end of 1868, granting full pardons to those who had participated in “the late insurrection,” the American Civil War. It wouldn’t be enough to premise our appeal around the Vietnam War’s essential wrongness; we had to remind a skeptical media and a benumbed public that the granting of full amnesty to resisting rebels, far from unprecedented, had its own roots in the nation’s historical narrative. To that narrative we now sought to join our own aggressive public crusade.

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1. Note to include comment on the influence of Tod's lifestyle on me... work and play, contempt for "voluntary poverty."
 2. The produce improved dramatically, but the prices skyrocketed. My theory was that the old guard couldn't imagine that customers would pay those prices, no matter how good the produce looked. This was just the beginning of boutique-grade food for the middle classes!
 3. I make note of the small number of this particular brand of ethnic restaurant at that time because, in succeeding years, "Indian" restaurants had come to proliferate in the East Village, most heavily concentrated on E. 6th Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues.
 4. I have posted two narratives on investigations into my German roots under the tab Family History on my website, www.veteanscholar.com.
 5. A note on Sicily...
 6. Note on the Prc
 7. As of the writing the school continues its existence in lower Manhattan under the name of the Brecht Forum.
 8. David McLellan, Karl Marx: His Life and Thought. Macmillan, 1973.