

Christodora The Flight of a Sea Animal: An inquiry into the rise and fall of one of the finest settlement houses in urban America. Christodora House on Avenue B, established in 1887 as The Young Women's Settlement House and later known in the neighborhood as the "Little House by the Side of the Road."

Date : June 19, 2014

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Frozen Stiff During Summer Heat Wave (One version of an introduction)

Oh boy, it's now ninety-six degrees and still rising. Not a single leaf moves above us, not one pigeon, not one squirrel. The dogs lie ominously quiet, perhaps they are already boiled. Even the concrete of our chess tables is hot. The tall cans of Rolling Rock which we buy at the Arab bodega on Avenue A become undrinkable in exactly seven minutes. The men and women sitting at the tables across from us are drinking blackberry brandy, washing it down with rum and Coke. They are playing Hearts. We are playing chess, not too seriously. Our special little oasis, the chess tables near Avenue B, is a place where dreams and hopes are long lost and forgotten. We are exhausted Bedouins sitting under a pyramid of sorts--- Christodora House on Avenue B.

It is still by far the tallest building in our sea of tenements. To me, it will always remain a mystery. A proud monument to noble aspirations. Built to serve the poor, now accommodating the rich. This pyramid, perhaps more than anything else, reflects the changes in the East Village, a neighborhood I love and have lived in for many years. Looking at it, I realize that it will be casting its shadow over the park long after I am gone. And the future Bedouins will be sitting in our oasis, wondering.

For us, this is the final encampment. We've run out of places to go. This is it, and the air is gray. A strangling curtain of gray lace. It's harder and harder to breathe. We try not to move, but we must. We are playing chess, after all. We have to make our moves. On the patches of dry grass behind our benches rest the relative newcomers to Tompkins Park---the homeless. To me, they are defeated and wounded soldiers, prisoners of war behind impenetrable barbed wire. Although I am a Bedouin, I feel kinship with them. Especially in the cold sweat of sleepless nights when I attempt to climb the barbed fences of my own concentration camps.

It reaches ninety-eight degrees. We are not zombies yet. We are reasonably intelligent beings. We sometimes talk politics. One young, black guy next to me who lives in the Men's Shelter and speaks Russian quite fluently sums up the policy of Glasnost and tells us a few Russian anecdotes. No one really pays much attention. My chess opponent is a Chinese scholar and translator. He is a white man, a former hippie who recently sent the daughter he had with a black woman to an upstate college. He strokes his long reddish beard and thoughtfully explains the current trends of Chinese literature. We pretend to be listening but our thoughts are on something else. Now that we seem to be surviving through this afternoon, we wonder: what about tonight? We dread it.

It's an all-consuming fear. Are we going to make it?

As soon as I close my eyes and try to relax, the projectionist starts running my reels again. Faster and faster. The years are out of sequence. Who cares? I don't. One summer my dog would die, another summer my son would grow up and walk away down the melting pavement. Why walk? Why walk away? Oh, yes, today the streets are also melting. My eyes are open. I do remember that everything in the East Village begins and ends on street level. It was like that in the misty, idealistic '60s when I first moved here and sat with thousands of hippies right where the homeless now sleep. We listened to Jefferson Airplane playing from the bandshell. All through the fires and muggings and the heroin of the '70s to the present-- our empty, deadly '80s. This one thing never changed. People still find their friends, their wives, their dogs and cats, their lovers, their books. Once I found a lady's gold watch in an envelope stuck into an old book thrown out on Avenue A. People get ripped off and drink their Colt 45 and Night Train Express and buy their drugs and do whatever is necessary to ease their pain. Sometimes, they die on street level. Enough. I make my move and realize I made a fatal error. I drink my beer and watch my opponent. He is in no hurry to finish me off. He lets me off the hook. Then we finish our lukewarm beer. The heat is finally getting to me. My mind keeps spinning even with my eyes wide open. Yet I know I am frozen. I am on a snow-covered steppe north of Stavropol, a frightened Russian boy, barely alive, listening to the thunder of artillery fire. I look across the table. I look sideways. All of us here in this park are frozen. Frozen in time and space and some of us are already dead. Sure, the chess pieces we are playing with belonged to Paul, our writer friend who used to walk in a funny way, so open and naive. In his apartment, he used to stack newspapers until they reached the ceiling. Not just any newspapers but The Wall Street Journal. Why? Nobody knew. There were at least 10 million cockroaches in his place. You couldn't even sit down. Paul was the greatest bartender at Max's Kansas City until he had a stroke. And for quite a few years, he sat frozen with us. He is long gone now, but we still play with his chess set. Paul's typewriter, his only valuable possession, was given to me. And it still types, as far as I know. I gave it to another writer. So many writers here and not enough typewriters. Another friend's system broke down, and he left to die near his parents, someplace in the Midwest. What's left? An unfinished canvas, a few pieces of furniture, a dog and a cat.

Our oasis itself is frozen. Only minor changes occur. Someone nods until his head hits the concrete chess table. Someone walks to the bodega to get more cold beer. Someone goes behind the tree and takes a leak. Our chess tables are very special. So different from the rest of the park. The realities of life don't matter here. Never did. We listen to a man from Ecuador talk about his village and the earth there, so fertile you plant a seed and in three days, it grows into a bush. We've heard his story many times before. It's the only story he knows. A couple of tables away, the elderly Ukrainians talk about sunflowers and the earth of their dreams. That's the only problem we have. Our spinning minds. The projectionist has gone berserk. Our reels run with the speed of twenty thousand frames per second. And it's ninety-eight degrees. I look at another summer, one of the years that stretch into centuries. The afternoon sun is reflecting in the shattered windows of Christodora House. I watch myself climbing old stairs and roofs. I walk precariously on planks made from two-by-fours. I climb through a broken, boarded-up window. I am inside the Pyramid. It's a long walk to the top floor. What a view. I am astounded.

I stand there for an hour, at least. Then I walk down through endless rooms and mountains of bottles and cans and hypodermic needles and women's purses ripped open. I see a giant black hole where the elevators once were. There are weird noises. I want to leave as soon as I can. I walk through what was once a magnificent oak-paneled library with a huge fireplace. Many piles of partially burned books lie on the floor. I pick one up. "Poetry is a journal kept by a sea animal living on land and wanting to fly the air." Perhaps this amazing building, this pyramid, had been such an animal all along. I think I should at least try to reconstruct its journal.

I see myself going insane for the next couple of years, talking to dozens of old-timers, sitting in libraries, sorting out the who, what, when, and how, and trying to answer some of the why. Thank God I did it when I wasn't entirely frozen. I ask the projectionist to rerun this part of my reel a bit slower. The projectionist reminds me that every morning during the summers, a handsome elderly black gentleman with a long silvery beard carries his bag of laundry into the park toilet. He washes his belongings in the sink and hangs everything on the fence to dry. He sits next to it with his eyes closed. Once his laundry dries, he folds it neatly and leaves the park. He never speaks to anyone. And why should he? He is the Great Pharaoh. In his native ancient Egypt, he has seen many groups of colorfully dressed, bearded architects spread out their plans for his pyramid.

In the East Village, just before the turn of the century, in August of 1887 to be precise, two very unlikely architects, both young women, began building their pyramid. They began, just as everything in the East Village begins and ends, then and now, on street level in a storefront: 167 Avenue B. Outside their door, they put a simple wooden sign: YOUNG WOMEN'S SETTLEMENT HOUSE---EVERYONE IS WELCOME. The Early Settlement Walking through the burned-out sections of the East Village between Avenues B and D, it is very difficult to imagine that at the turn of the century over 4,000 people lived on each and every one of these devastated and mostly empty blocks.

When you add all the thousands of horses, pigs, chickens, sheep, cows, geese, goats, and dogs, every square foot of space was used. So were the alleys, roofs, basements, and streets. The density was unreal. The area was landfill over a swamp. Swarms of mosquitoes were so thick that horses would collapse from sheer loss of blood when left unattended. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people were dying each year from malaria alone. God only knows how many died from other diseases and hunger.

From 1881 through 1889 close to six million immigrants from Europe and Turkey arrived in New York. About one third of them settled on the Lower East Side for a period of ten years or more.

The nation could not easily absorb this flow of humanity. There were intense debates in Congress and everywhere in the country for and against immigration. The opposing views changed little over the following decades. Even today, one could substitute the dates and nationalities of the immigrants and hear the same arguments. For example, writing in the 1883 issue of the North American Review, Honorable W. B. Chandler (Chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration) states that, "We cannot safely undertake the assimilation of the ignorant and debased human beings who are tending toward us." He also raises the familiar question of whether other countries were sending us their criminal and "low life element" so that we could feed and care for them. Cautiously arguing against the suspension of immigration, Senator Henry Hansbrough of North Dakota wrote in the same issue: "The strong, healthy and honest immigrant brings more than the paltry dollars in his pockets." Nevertheless, Frederick Knapp (Commissioner of Immigration of the State of New York) placed a definite economic value of \$1,125 on each immigrant. And the debates continued.

To the average new immigrant who had just given away his last penny and all his valuable icons, rings, or silverware to various immigration officials as bribes to get off Ellis Island, such high appraisal would seem a cruel joke.

It was very difficult to survive on the Lower East Side in 1893. For the young immigrant woman, life was a continuing nightmare.

Aside from getting married, she had three basic choices. If she was pretty she could become a prostitute. If she was strong, she could work in a sweatshop or as a maid. If

she did not have these qualities, she could become a nun.

There was also the East River, the gas stoves, and the roofs of the tenements. Many young women chose those routes, too.

It was against this background that two young women, Christine McCall and Sara Carson, pulled together their meager resources, barely enough to cover a month's rent, and took a three-room flat and an unfinished storefront at 167 Avenue B between Tenth and Eleventh streets. This was the site of the original Young Women's Settlement House, known in the neighborhood later as the Little House by the Side of the Road. It opened its doors in the summer of 1887.

Miss McCall, a slight, intense woman in her late twenties, had been a YWCA worker uptown. Both she and her friend, Sara Carson, were active in the Suffrage movement. The Settlement House they founded was unique in several ways. First, there were no other Settlement Houses in the area (the nearest was the University Settlement on Eldridge Street). Second, although it was non-denominational, it followed a grass roots Christian philosophy. Third, its work was restricted to young immigrant women, their parents, and children. Many programs that originated at the Young Women's Settlement became models for social programs nationwide some 60 years later. After-school daycare programs for working mothers; women's awareness groups, a program providing medical and psychiatric help for unwed mothers; even services to make the tenement flats more livable for single women. They also pioneered sending social workers to city jails to tutor illiterate children, 10 to 14 years of age, who were imprisoned.

This program was very important because there were thousands (some estimates range over ten thousand) such children in prisons or in the so-called "work camps." Some of these children were actually executed for crimes ranging from ordinary burglary to murder. In cases involving these children, miscarriage of justice was the rule rather than the exception. The needs of all people of the neighborhood gradually changed the primary purpose of the Settlement House, and the programs within it became more generalized. When the House moved into a large three-story brownstone on Avenue A and Ninth Street, it became somewhat like the Henry Street Settlement, a cultural/social/educational community center. Its social program was still a priority but, as time went on, it was eclipsed by the new cultural programs. The Settlement now had an established music school with over 250 students, a glee club, a theater club. There were citizenship classes for adults, dances, concerts, lectures and poetry readings by the members of its famous Poetry Guild.

On March 21, 1914, one of the more promising students of its Music School, George Gershwin, age 15, gave his first public concert. The reviews were mixed. George's brother, Ira, was active in the glee club and Poetry Guild. That Poetry Guild, which boasted the smallest theater in America (rear bedroom, their "Magic Casements"), produced not only some of the great American poets, but a whole string of popular novelists, Jerome Weidman among them, who often used the Settlement House as a background for their novels. Some of the biggest names in film and theater, producers and actors (Edward G. Robinson and Tony Curtis among them) were in the theater club. An estimated 5,000 people visited the Little House by the Side of the Road, as it was sometimes affectionately called, every week.

During the summer, hundreds of kids went to their Bound Brook Camp in New Jersey or spent weekends as guests of Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James on her vast estate in Tarrytown. Mrs. James was the institutions president and Chairman of its Board of Managers. A lot of money began flowing into various Settlement House activities.

Toward the mid-'20s, the neighborhood changed completely. So, once again, did the emphasis of the Settlement's work. Miss McCall stepped down as Director and Herbert Beal was brought in. The main activities were now the Music School, the adult citizenship classes, the Boy Scouts (Troop 202 was stationed there), and the Nature clubs. Many of the meaningful social programs were quietly dropped. There developed a kind of wall between the Settlement and the community it served. A couple of scandals involving some staff workers and local women further alienated the neighborhood.

Jerome Weidman describes the settlement in one of his novels as "an outpost of the Uptown world planted in their midst, an oasis founded and operated by strangers for reasons never quite understood and trusted by their beneficiaries."

These strangers included some super-wealthy and powerful people. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James had given the Settlement its three-story brownstone in the first place and were now committed to building a huge 18-story building on its site. It would be the largest Settlement House ever built in America.

The Super Rich

Arthur Curtiss James and his wife, the former Harriet Eddie Parsons, were not merely super rich, but the absolute cream of the crop of New York society. Mr. James, a railroad tycoon, financier, and owner of several huge companies, was estimated to be worth 300 million dollars in the mid-'20s---he was in the class of J.P. Morgan and the Rockefellers. He lived in a twelve-story mansion on Millionaires' Row at 998 Fifth Avenue. There was a mansion of equal magnitude in Newport, Rhode Island, and an estate in Tarrytown, New York. During World War I, Mrs. James, always a civic-minded lady and from all accounts a very sensitive person as well, entertained over 1,200 soldiers on some weekends at their Tarrytown estate. Mr. James was eccentric and contradictory, as idiosyncratic in some respects as Howard Hughes. He was an avid yachtsman. He sailed across the Atlantic, down the Nile and the White Nile. He was an art collector with tastes ranging from the English masters (George Romney, Joshua Reynolds) to Touraine tapestries and Roman sarcophaguses in which, it was rumored, he liked to take a nap from time to time.

He was also a great and intelligent philanthropist in his time and was active in his church, the First Presbyterian on Fifth Avenue and Eleventh Street. He was active in politics. His support was valued highly by the mayor, the governor, as well as those in the Senate and White House.

His favorite charities were as diverse as his art collection. He gave to the Metropolitan Museum (he was a trustee), the Union Theological Seminary, and a wide range of unrelated organizations in between. It was his wife who interested him in the work of the Young Women's Settlement House and the Christodora House.

For a time, he became obsessed with poverty and the Settlement's work. One of the legends was that he used to park his Packard north of 14th Street and, dressed as a pushcart peddler, walk down Avenue B to his Settlement House, talking to people along the way. He would later sit at a meeting of the Board of Managers and astound everyone with his knowledge of the neighborhood and its problems.

When the new Christodora House was dedicated to him in December of 1928, Mr. James admitted to his friends that he considered it his greatest achievement. In the '30s, he must have felt the depression. He sold his Fifth Avenue mansion to move into a smaller six-story townhouse at 39 East 69th Street. This townhouse was called one of the most elegant in the city by several newspapers and periodicals. In 1931, Mrs. James became an invalid. She died ten years later. Mr. James died the following month.

The couple had no children. The estate was divided in accordance with Mr. James's will between numerous relatives and friends. The James Foundation was set up to continue charitable work. The principal benefactors were the Christodora Foundation and the YMCA. About a dozen other organizations received lesser amounts of the foundation's shares. It was a very complicated arrangement. The James Foundation was set up for a period of 25 years. It apparently ceased to function in the mid-'60s. The Christodora Foundation still exists. It was after a long conversation with Mr. Steven Slobodin, the present director of the Christodora Foundation, that I decided to do some serious research for this book.

The Pyramid

To people living in lower Manhattan, this building is a familiar sight. For decades, it stood abandoned. Among other firsts, the building had the dubious distinction of being the first slum skyscraper. I suspect that the reason it wasn't torn down was that nobody knew how to do it. Like a pyramid, it was built to last forever.

In 1928, it officially opened as the new Christodora House, replacing the Little House at the Side of the Road. It was then, and is now, a true palace amidst the tenements of the East Village. It was built on a floating foundation---an architectural first. It had everything. A large swimming pool, a gymnasium with parquet floors and handball court, a concert hall that held three hundred people, a restaurant, and a solarium. The library was paneled in oak and had a large working fireplace. Early American furniture bought at Sloane's was installed throughout the entire building. A few masterpieces from the legendary Arthur Curtiss James art collection hung in the lobby and in the classrooms of the Music School. It was indeed the biggest Settlement House ever built in America.

The new Christodora House was a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James. It cost them almost two million dollars to erect it. In 1928, that was a lot of cash. During the years that followed, it became the in place for New York society figures to visit and donate money to. Long lines of Rolls Royces, Packards and Cadillacs were observed parked on East Ninth Street near the side entrance. The neighborhood children, barefoot and dressed in rags, often besieged the car occupants and chauffeurs, begging for pennies. Although the Settlement's work went on during those years, the activities, instead of expanding, began to contract. The importance of the Residence Club for young men and women occupying the upper floors was stressed.

Handsome advertising flyers from the Christodora Residence Club detailed "elegant living," convenience and good service. The rates were from \$7 to \$10 a week; \$1.50 a day for transients. Breakfast and supper were included. The guests also had the use of the swimming pool, gymnasiums, the library and the solarium. No tipping was allowed throughout the building.

The people occupying the Residence Club were mostly young executives, teachers, legal secretaries, doctors, nurses and New York University graduate students with trust funds. The yuppies of that time. There were no neighborhood people living in the building, but cleaning women and other low-paid help were recruited from the area.

During World War II, the building housed some refugees from Nazi Germany on a very select basis: professors, lawyers, journalists, scientists, etc.

For a very brief time after the war, some upper floors were used to house (under armed guard) Soviet citizens, primarily prisoners of war from Fort Dix who refused to go back to Russia. Under the Yalta agreement, they were to be forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union anyway. This was done in total secrecy. No member of the Settlement's staff knew

the details or purpose of this operation. In the summer of 1946, two of these prisoners jumped out of the windows of Christodora House. One died, the other managed to escape. There were eyewitnesses, but the incident was not reported in any of the New York papers. The operation moved elsewhere immediately afterward.

What transpired in 1947 has all the elements of mystery, suspense, political intrigue, and human drama. It makes today's anti-poverty rip-offs seem like child's play. The city fathers suddenly decided that what the city needed was a Youth Detention Facility. They thought the Christodora House would be perfect for that purpose. Christodora leadership at that time was floundering. The city made an offer for the building which was difficult to resist: \$2.6 million in cash and adequate space in the newly constructed Jacob Riis housing complex on Avenue D. The only catch was that the Settlement had to go to two buildings: one on Eighth Street and one on Tenth Street along Avenue D. It was a most devious offer.

A big split developed among the Christodora Board of Managers. The conservative faction with whom the director, Mr. Beal, was thought to be aligned, argued for the sale, citing the ever-rising maintenance costs and rising deficits (the Residence Club was not paying for itself). The liberals argued that leaving the building and going to another neighborhood would be a terrible blow to a community served so long and with such dedication by the Settlement staff. Still another group of managers, the realists, tried to convince city officials that it would simply be too costly to convert the building into, basically, a jail. The Board of Managers rejected the city offer by a slim majority. Then the city pulled a fast one. They came in and condemned the entire building, citing some minor violations. This was a sham, of course. The building was in fine shape. At the next board meeting, after intensive maneuvering, the realists caved in. The city's offer was accepted and the Settlement House moved soon thereafter to two locations on Avenue D. After the city took possession of the building, they conducted an extensive study and found that what the realists were telling them was true. Converting the building to a secure facility would indeed be too costly. So they decided to build the Youth Detention Center from scratch in the Bronx (on Spafford Avenue). However, they were now stuck with an empty skyscraper.

Enter all the elements of a Marx Brothers movie. Incredibly, the city offered to sell the building back to the Christodora House. The same officials who only a few months before were trying to push the Settlement House out, were running around begging and pressuring the Board members into buying back the building. Only it just wasn't possible for the Settlement House to move back for many reasons.

A big scandal was in the making. The city had to do something, and fast. First, they clamped the lid of secrecy over the entire matter. Some of their records vanished; some were falsified; key officials were quietly shifted to other boroughs.

The city then moved a unit of the Welfare Department, called the Department of Employment and Training, into the building. It was an unadulterated whitewash to get the reporters from the Journal American, who were close to cracking the story, off the scent. That welfare "operation" was a "paper operation," but the woman in charge of it was an able, seasoned, and crafty bureaucrat. She wrote glowing reports about her achievements. In time, everyone forgot that the building was virtually empty. As far as the city was concerned, it was used to full capacity.

The woman in charge was also farsighted enough not to allow anyone from the neighborhood into the building. The use of the gymnasiums and the pool were now denied to local kids. She would even order that the donated used clothing be burned rather than distribute it to the local poor. Some residents say she feared that clothing

donated by the uptown whites would fall into the hands of the Puerto Ricans and blacks who were moving into the area.

Neighborhood people, as well as community groups, knew that there was nothing happening in the building. In 1951, St. Brigit's Church, a large Catholic congregation in the community, decided to offer the city one million dollars with the idea of using part of the Christodora building to replace its ancient and overcrowded parochial school. The city indignantly refused the offer since they still pretended that the building was being used. So the Welfare Department "operation" worked out of the nearly empty building for over six years. Eventually, someone in the city looked at the maintenance costs and was horrified. The city quietly closed the building and retired the "dedicated public servant" who ran her "paper operation." The building remained closed for over ten years. It was, however, in very good shape and everything in it was working. It was a ship in mothballs.

The Displaced Settlement House

After moving from the Avenue B building, the Christodora Settlement House was in a new neighborhood. It was also now divided into two parts: two floors of the Jacob Riis housing complex on 10th Street and Avenue D, and almost three floors on Eighth Street and Ave. D. The Jacob Riis housing complex was originally build for the returning World War II veterans and their families, but even as early as 1947, it already had a sizeable welfare population, many of whom were elderly.

There were strong tenant organizations in the crowded housing complex who resented the free space that the city had allocated to the Settlement and immediately demanded meaningful programs from its staff.

These demands were for improving services to the elderly women in particular, establishing expanded daycare facilities for preschoolers, after-school tutoring for public and private school children, expansion of their daycare and summer camp facilities, hiring of neighborhood residents, and so on.

The floundering and somewhat demoralized leadership of the Christodora House, not used to any demands from the politically naive community around Tompkins Square Park, was further demoralized and divided by this unexpected and strong pressure.

They shifted the main focus back to social problems. The music school was closed. A few arts-related programs were also dropped. They expanded their summer camp and daycare facilities. But the demands continued.

In an effort to expand their area of service, they acquired a brownstone on 151 Avenue B, two doors from their old building, and the former Recreation Rooms Settlement on First Street near First Avenue.

They departed from their former philosophy and trained and hired social workers who were community residents.

According to one former Christodora social worker whom I interviewed, the problem was partly their inertia, their unwillingness to promote outreach into the community. That worker thought it originated with their director, Mr. Beal, who appeared to be a remote and inaccessible man, trying to run the settlement as if it were a business. With Mr. Slobodin assuming the directorship of the Christodora House in 1958, the Settlement experienced a brief renaissance. There were, however, many new factors on the Lower East Side scene. The neighborhood changed radically, once again. There was a large influx of Puerto Rican and Slavic immigrants. The veterans in Jacob Riis housing project moved out. It became housing for people on welfare and other forms of public assistance.

New York City's social services had improved considerably. Some of their social programs were the exact duplicates of Christodora's former programs. Many Christodora workers began working for the city.

When the Mobilization for Youth project (MFY) was launched on the Lower East Side by Henry Street Settlement and five other Settlement Houses, including the Christodora House, the Board of Managers expressed concern that they were in direct competition with one of the projects they had helped to launch. The decision was made to get out of the city altogether and put their efforts into their Bound Brook Summer Camp activities. They argued that federal, state, and city governments, who were now supporting youth activities in the ghettos of the inner cities, did not give any support to summer camps or activities, leaving it to private foundations, like the Christodora House. Presently, the Christodora Foundation supports three summer camps for city kids in northern New Jersey. Whether the decision to leave the East Village was the right one or a cop-out, the departure of the Settlement House left a great void in our East Village community. It certainly contributed to the neighborhood's rapid deterioration, especially east of Avenue B. I have tried not to rely too much on just the available research material. I have found some of the newspaper and magazine accounts pertaining to the Christodora House to be misleading, or downright erroneous. The New York Times for example, made basic errors in its 1928 article; and then again in 1969 and 1971.

Personal accounts give a more accurate picture. A seventy-year-old Vista volunteer working in the area remembered living at the Christodora Residence Club at the time Hitler invaded Norway. A Ukrainian woman who worked as a maid in the same residence recalled some fascinating details of day-to-day operations of the House. And many others shared their memories: A local businessman who played basketball in the old brownstone and belonged to their famous 202 Boy Scout troop. Several former teachers and social workers. A former World War II veteran who organized their "One to One" Club working with retarded children. A well-known composer who went to their music school. An actor who vividly remembers their Christmas and Halloween celebrations, and who learned to swim in the Christodora pool. Several mothers who had children enrolled in various activities. A former welfare official. A Russian soldier who was held there briefly after World War II and escaped before he could be forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union. A retired Italian city sanitation worker who was born next door to the original Young Women's Settlement (167 Avenue B), and many more.

So far, I have interviewed over thirty people, including the current director and administrator of the Christodora Fund, Mr. Steven Slobodin. I have plans to interview about a dozen more people whose lives have been touched in some way by this unique Settlement House. Actor Tony Curtis's entire life was changed when he was brought to the Settlement House as a juvenile delinquent, and fell under the influence of Paul Schwartz. Paul was one of the House's best social workers, and he introduced Tony to the Theatre Club. The dead characters are just as important as the living. People like Christine Isobel McCall and Sara Libby Carson; Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James; Dr. Stanton Coit and Lillian Wald; George and Ira Gershwin; Jacob Riis and Jane Addams; Bird C. Coler and Henry Pelton; Commissioner Rhatigan and Mayor O'Dwyer; Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hall; Governor Dewey and Governor Harriman; and Moise, the famous doorman, handyman and jack-of-all-trades at both the old and new houses.

The Radicals Take Over Tompkins Square Community Center

This particular period I remember only too well. Actually, I was only peripherally involved with the Tompkins Square Community Center (TSCC), helping out with their food co-op in the late '60s. But many of my friends, both radicals and simple people trying to help our already disintegrating community, were deeply involved in running the center. Some of

the radicals who were young then are still making headlines. People involved in the Brinks job, Joanne Chesimard, Antony La Borde, Donald Weems; just about all of the Who's Who of the black/white radical establishment was at one time or another inside the Christodora House, which they controlled for four years.

Many plots against "imperialist Amerik-k-ka" were hatched in the building. Some, such as one to kidnap Lyndon Johnson, were too fantastic to go beyond the talking stage. Others, such as the "Panthers 21" plot to blow up the Statue of Liberty, have received nationwide attention and resulted in trials, frame-ups, convictions, reversals, and so on. There might have been a large cache of weapons hidden in the building, probably in the flooded sub-basement. The infamous .9mm pistols, some sub-machine guns, grenades and probably some plastic explosives. It's hardly a coincidence that after the radicals had finally been evicted from the building, patrolmen Rocco and Laurie were massacred with .9mm pistols on the corner of 11th Street and Avenue B, only two blocks from the Christodora House. "Evicted" in this case is not exactly the right word. I recall vividly hundreds of Tactical Force police in battle gear surrounding the building, positioning themselves on nearby rooftops. A helicopter buzzed near the Christodora roof, its machine gun trained on the building. Avenue B and East Ninth Street were closed to traffic. All the people in Tompkins Square Park were forced to leave. The park was sealed off completely.

From the roof of my building on Seventh Street and Avenue B, a couple of friends and I watched this doomsday scenario unfold. We were led to believe by local radical mouthpieces that there were four hundred teenagers inside who had sworn to defend the building to their death. They were prepared to fight room by room and then blow themselves up, rather than surrender to "the pigs." It was supposed to be another Stalingrad. Everyone anticipated a huge battle.

We did see what looked like machine gun barrels sticking out of the top floor windows. The loudspeakers blared back and forth as various city officials scurried around the building trying to negotiate something. Suddenly the loudspeaker stopped.

There was a brief battle. Later, one of the kids who was inside told me what happened in detail. From my roof, we could see the helicopter drop a few tear gas grenades into the upper windows. A platoon of cops stormed the building from the roof of P.S. 64. Simultaneously, another unit burst through the front door. I saw a group of about a dozen frightened teenagers run out from the side entrance with their hands in the air. They were handcuffed quickly and hustled into a bus waiting along East Ninth Street. Then the cops led a few men and women, some of whom were screaming, out of the building. The adults were not handcuffed. They seemed to be arguing with the police and city brass. There were a few cops left by the entrance, but the radical era was definitely over. The next morning, city workers boarded up the doors. This happened in 1972 and the building remained shut for fourteen years.

The radical era began with the Lindsay administration in 1966. When Lindsay was sworn in as Mayor, the East Village from 14th Street to Houston Street, and Avenue A to Avenue D was a cohesive, bustling neighborhood with a mixed lower-income population. There were over two thousand small businesses owned and operated mostly by local residents. Along Avenues C and D, there were many vegetable markets, butcher shops, fish stores, dozens of bakeries, clothing stores, shoe stores and shoe repair shops, pharmacies, delis, candy stores, restaurants and even small toy factories. Anything and everything could be bought and sold. In terms of quality of life, 1966 wasn't so bad. There was practically no crime and no abandoned or burned-out buildings. The children were safe even in the public schools. There was little racial or ethnic animosity, mainly because all the working poor were from many ethnic and racial backgrounds. There were about fifteen hundred

people living on each block. Puerto Ricans and Slavs (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Carpatno Russians) comprised the major population, followed closely by Bohemians, Jews, Blacks and Albanians. There were still a few small Irish and Italian enclaves. Rent was cheap. In just a few years, an average family could save enough money to move to Greenpoint, Brooklyn or New Jersey. Many of the people, especially the elderly, did not want to move anywhere. They had their friends and relatives right in the neighborhood. It was their small village.

Actually, the area was more like a town. It also served the sprawling Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald housing complexes between Avenue D and FDR Drive. This not-so-little town became one of America's Hiroshimas, destroyed by human greed and the corruption of "poverty-pimp" politics first introduced by Mr. Lindsay. I and many of my friends living in the area had voted for him in 1965.

As we watched our community being destroyed during his administration, the truth of one proverb often came to mind: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

The intentions were great. Community control, an infusion of massive anti-poverty funds into the area to create new youth projects, rehabilitation of the old tenements, and many other plans. The only problem was that the Lindsay Administration Commissioners in charge of these various great projects were like Lindsay himself-wealthy, white, liberal politicians. They were unaware of the fact that in addition to Blacks and Puerto Ricans, there were also poor whites living in New York. In our area of the East Village, these poor Whites accounted for over 60 percent of the population.

Everything the Lindsay administration introduced was done on a racial basis. It did not work even in predominantly Puerto Rican and Black areas, such as the South Bronx and Williamsburg. In the East Village, it was a disaster.

Let me give a mild example of how such a policy worked at the street level. Two teenagers I knew lived in the same house on my block for at least ten years. One was Polish and one Puerto Rican. Every year the two of them got summer jobs with the Parks Department. In 1966, the Puerto Rican kid got the job but the Polish kid did not because he was white. When he got home, his Puerto Rican friend suggested that he change his name from Robert to Roberto and the ending of his last name from -ski to -oz. He did and got the job. But this story has no happy ending. The seeds of racism...

[Editor's note: This is where the article ends, Mr. Kapralov passed away before he was able to finish this piece, or the book he planned on expanding it into.]



Reprinted from Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, Alan Moore, Howard Seligman, editors, Resistance: A Social and Political History of the Lower East Side (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007)