

The Tompkins Square Community Center – by Susan Simensky-Bietela

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I was living on East 2nd and Avenue B on the 5th floor of a walk-up tenement (a building which collapsed not long after I left). Our rent was \$60 a month. The bathtub was in the kitchen. It was a step up from our previous apartment, where the filthy toilet was down the hall and shared by the entire floor and there was no shower or tub at all. No escape from the roaches, but we happily left the bedbugs behind at our 11th Street and Avenue C apartment. My boyfriend Tom and I both grew up in housing projects in the impoverished East New York section of Brooklyn and having our own place was enough.

I had to look up and down the street before entering the building to make sure that no one was in position to follow after me to rob the little I had. I ran up each flight of stairs and paused to do my best to check the next landing for anyone in wait. Tom had a motorcycle and carried it upstairs with him for the night. Triple locks on the door and gates on the window did not stop an addict neighbor from busting the wall adjacent to the door and taking tools and sheets and absolutely everything. Even the tooth paste was gone.

After that, there were no major crises with our immediate neighbors, at least until soon after we left. Connie and Carlos lived on the 4th floor. Connie was taking a bath, the tub in the kitchen as ours was. Suddenly she found herself taking her bath on the 3rd floor. The floor had collapsed. No one was seriously injured. I guess more of that sort of thing must have happened, because when I went looking for the building a few years later, the building was gone.

The apartment was on 2nd Street, a few doors east of Avenue B. on the south side of the street. Our window looked out on Houston. Four tiny two-room apartments on each floor looked exactly like the ones in the Jacob Riis “How the Other Half Lives” photos. At least now there was a toilet in the apartment, but there was so little space around it, you had to be small to use it. After the break-in, with plaster everywhere, we decided to take down the rest of the plaster and exposed the brick and a small stone fireplace. We put a finishing seal on the brick and iron hooks to hang the pots and utensils. Tom built a loft bed with a desk and art table below. We threw the plaster and lathing strips off the fire escape and then cleaned it up from the back yard below.

There was a Cuban-Chinese restaurant on that corner - tasty, greasy food. Fried rice made with blood sausage. It smelled great, but we could rarely afford it. So we pooled resources with neighbors on the 5th floor to have more exciting meals. We were also a seemingly incongruous mix, who lived together harmoniously. Arthur was from the Bronx, Chinese-American and also a New Left political activist. He grew up speaking Cantonese and was teaching himself Mandarin. He decided that I could learn along with him. At the time there was a theory that you could learn a language in your sleep, so we gave him a key and he played “Learning Mandarin Chinese” records while I slept. It didn’t work. Arthur would shop in Chinatown and show up with good ingredients, but insisted that he didn’t know how to cook. He carried in bags of food, ginger, Chinese cabbage, dried mushrooms, and sat himself down in the kitchen, cigarette in hand. He was perfectly able to tell me step-by-step what his mother would do to prepare these ingredients as I followed along, cooking the dinner.

The next apartment was Mickey and Eddie aka Micki and Edwina, 42nd Street drag

queens. They were buddies who met in Elmira, their favorite prison. Mickey assumed the role of a doting Jewish mother, cooking me chicken soup when I was sick and gently carrying me cradled in his giant arms all the way to Bellevue emergency room, when I broke a bone in my foot. The fourth neighbor didn't mix with us. She was a very elderly Puerto Rican woman who didn't open her door, even when we tried to bring her food. I only saw her a few times when she sat on the fire escape and threw cans at police cars passing on Houston Street. And then she was taken away. So three apartments had weekly potluck dinners. Arthur bought prepared foods or drink.

We were living on Tom's Social Security disability checks. I worked some nights alone at the the New York Review of Books, typing. My job was transcribing the Chicago Conspiracy Trial from court documents into the massive computer in preparation for its publication as a book. Then we both got mononucleosis and were laid up for months. We were diagnosed by Dr. June Finer, who ran a free clinic out of a trailer near Houston Street. We subsisted on the welfare food supplements. Tom had grown up eating these food surplus commodities - tasteless powdered milk, macaroni, rice, oatmeal, corn meal, cans of peanut butter, canned rough texture corn, blocks of yellow surplus American cheese, gristly generic Spam, flour and of course lard. If we had been Native American, we would have had the makings of fry bread. The only restaurant we could ever afford was Wo Hop on Bayard Street. Down in a basement, they had a 99 cent lo mein. A few blocks from the Tombs, it had long been my celebration place, a convenient rendezvous when friends got bailed out after demonstration busts.

I had been on the art/production staff of the Guardian (radical newsweekly), on East 4th Street and then part of the Rat collective, women who took over the radical underground paper, having enough of exploitative sexist stereotyping and of being relegated to the subservient traditional female role. Participation by women as writers and artists had been consistently rejected by men claiming to be revolutionaries, not to speak of including women in positions of power such as editors or theorists. I hand-lettered the first issue of Rat as well as many of the headlines over the year. I drew covers and illustrations and participated fully in collective editorial decisions. It was really wonderful until the beginnings of identity politics were used to fuel schisms.

I drifted away from the Rat collective during the second year. Competing 'more oppressed than thou', 'more revolutionary than thou' claims destroyed the joy of collectivity. 'Woman-identified-woman' defined heterosexuality as subservience to male authority and 'following Third World leadership' became the dogma. I was poor and working class and that oppression was invisible and a priori unimportant to them. My own political ideas were no longer included in the mix. So I banded together with others like myself on the Lower East Side and in Brooklyn. We were interviewed on WBAI about being white and working-class in the movement and the show won awards. This positioned Tom and I to be summer replacements for a lunchtime call in anti-war show on WBAI radio. We continued to go to the demonstrations to free the Panther 21 as well as anti-Vietnam War and Womens Liberation actions. When we married at the Washington Square Methodist Church, the people who had just finished demonstrating to free the women of the Panther 21 at the Womens House of Detention arrived only a little late to our wedding to join the celebration. The pastor and most of the guests wore motorcycle boots and leather jackets, together with motorcycle helmets, routine protective gear from the swing of police batons and blackjacks at demonstrations.

Tom had been an electrician's apprentice and then an elevator repairman's apprentice. A former room-mate of ours, just accepted to Cornell Law School was active in the NY Panther Defense Committee. He asked Tom to help put in electric wiring at the Panther Defense Committee office and assist a freelance inventor install an innovative system of burglar alarms. It was important to protect the files containing donors' identities from

theft by government spies. The FBI was in the business of threatening the careers and reputations of wealthy or socially prominent donors to Panther Defense and other left movements. The alarms were perimeter alarms, protecting entry to the space but also alarms on the file cabinets and other objects. The alarm inventor told us that he and his girlfriend were part of a group starting a food-coop on the Lower East Side, near where we lived, and invited us to get involved. We liked the idea of a food co-op politically and were pretty desperate to find a way to get food ourselves.

We went to a meeting to look at the space and found that it was a noble high-rise building on the east side of Tompkins Square Park, a place we walked past daily. The 16-story Christodora Building had been a Settlement House and then a Community Center with a pool, a gym, a library, workshops and kitchens. It was owned by the City, and had been vacant and locked since around 1956. It was built in 1928, and intended to be the Lower East Side's Community Center. The building had been recently liberated by neighborhood members of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party who named it the Tompkins Square Community Center - reoccupied in the name of the community.

The entrance led into a high-ceilinged foyer and to the right was a small anteroom, furnished with discarded seats from cars with crates for coffee tables. It opened into the dimly lit parquet wood-floored gym, which was to become the site of the Food Co-op. Straight ahead from the main entrance foyer, and up the curved grand staircase there was a carpentry shop with lathes already humming. Louis, a skilled cabinetmaker, was working in rare woods. He had moved in his power tools and work tables. He was building joining zebrawood or mahogany into elegant tables and offering carpentry classes free to neighborhood youth.

The elevator had not moved in a very long time. I'm sure that Tom's offer to fix the elevator made us most welcome. His skills were valued and our politics were compatible. We signed up for Food Co-op work time and joined the effort to rehabilitate this wonderful space.

The Food Co-op worked as follows: a team lined up a borrowed truck, and a rotating crew volunteers went to Queens to the Hunts Point wholesale produce market during its pre-dawn hours once a week and returned with the truck full of produce - whatever was inexpensive and what people would likely want to eat. a larger group assembled to meet the truck and unload, and organize the food into recycled paper sacks to be sold by the bag full. Soon after on the same morning, the building was opened to the community for people to get the food - bargain prices for fresh produce. We expanded to canned goods and dry goods. We posted prices in English and Spanish on chalkboards. Initially, there was no storage as the building was infested with rodents and bugs. We bought metal trash cans to hold beans and rice. We got bacalao, dried salted codfish, a Caribbean staple. I don't recall if we were able to get refrigeration going. Maybe we got a few coolers.

Tom and I were among the first to fully explore the upstairs. Many rooms looked like they had been small offices. Pieces of the ceiling and walls had fallen onto scattered broken furniture parts. Plaster dust and long strips of business machine rolls of receipt paper, broken glass and pigeon shit littered the grey-green cracked linoleum tile floor. Many windows were broken so that especially on the upper floors, you felt cold air entering from one side of the building with a clear path to blow out the broken windows opposite. Despite so much of the building being pigeon habitat, I saw grand possibilities.

The intention was to turn the building into free space for community organizations and for free classes in various topics of interest. One of the first was a self-defense class taught by the burglar-alarm inventor. The plans were to gradually expand onto the

higher floors.

Tom got to work on the the elevator with me press-ganged into being his unskilled helper. He oiled some things and cleaned and greased other things. We went around on the motorcycle to find used parts to replace the worn parts. Then he had me ride on top of the car while he rechecked the machinery and adjusted the cables. Riding on the top of the elevator car as it rose up the shaft toward the roof was terrifying. Tom had assured me that it was safe, but knowing Tom, this wasn't completely reassuring. He had a round scar on his thigh from a bullet wound. He had accidentally shot himself with a zip gun a few years before. He had been surreptitiously using the metal lathe at Franklin K. Lane High School in his shop class to create his own James Bond inspired guns out of various objects like pens, and umbrella tips and one of his inventions had inadvertently fired.

Some of us worked clearing trash out of rooms on the upper rooms. It was safer now that it could be hauled down in the elevator instead of tossing it out the windows, but the task was enormous and not pressing. I did not spend much time on the upper floors again.

I don't remember most of the people involved, other than the inventor and his petite girlfriend who had a short Afro. I do remember Lena Powell, whose husband John was one of the Panther 21. She was active in the Food Co-op. Lena was from Sweden and she had two small children. And I remember Louis, the carpenter, who one of the few Puerto Rican members of the core group - warm and cheerful, burly build and calloused hands. The core of the Food Co-op activists did not represent the diversity of the community as most of us were in our 20s, and few had children, but becoming representative and having the foods that most people wanted and could afford seemed obvious to us. Our purpose was to emulate the Panthers and the Young Lords and organize to "Serve the People". Although the building was "liberated" by the Panthers and Lords, they were not active in the Community Center or the Food Co-op. By the time I was involved, it seemed that they had opened the building and turned it over to the community. Many of the shoppers were older and Puerto Rican. We started to include more Puerto Rican staples like bacalao (dried salted codfish) and Goya canned products. We already carried platanos and began to buy rice and beans and jalapenos. Things were growing steadily and everything functioned well for a time.

Then a number of people from a new neighborhood demographic began to come to meetings. They wanted the co-op to order their "health foods". It was the early days of "organic". The new people were not poor. They were professionals who bought co-op apartments or apartments in renovated buildings which were starting to creep into the neighborhood. We never expected to be taken over. Meetings full of friction soured the experience. It was a class conflict between people who wanted discount on prices for high end foods and those who wanted to make quality fresh food accessible at the lowest price to the poor and hungry in our community. For awhile we tried compromise, doing both kinds of food, but it was much more work and not a sustainable project. And for me the joy was gone. The new people had no interest in creating a utopian model, but arrogantly demanded that our organization be put to work for their discount buyers' club. The meetings which had once had a celebratory communitarian spirit had turned contentious and nasty. This class conflict soured the group.

I don't remember exactly how it all ended because I just stopped participating. I started Nursing School in Brooklyn and had no time to spare. Tom and I soon broke up and I moved back to Brooklyn.

I soon joined Medical Committee for Human Rights ("Health Care is a Right, Not a Privilege") and became what is now called a street medic at demonstrations. And in all

the years since, I have continued to be involved in projects which “serve the people”.