

“GROWING UP JEWISH IN THE 1940S”

by
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During the thirties and forties, ethnic communities flourished within the greater Boston area. The Italians settled in the North End, the Irish in South Boston and the Jews in Dorchester and Roxbury

I grew up on Havelock Street in Dorchester with my extended family, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandmother, living within walking distance from my home. All my friends were Jewish as were my neighbors. I lived in the second floor apartment of a two family house which faced Blue Hill Avenue, a main thoroughfare, divided by the trolley, which ran along Blue Hill Avenue from Mattapan Square to Egleston Square. Both sides of the Avenue bustled with Jewish merchants. Within a three mile radius, there were four Orthodox synagogues and a Jewish community center.

I recall walking alongside Mama on Blue Hill Avenue as she pushed my baby brother in his stroller, a mesh shopping bag slung over the handle. We greeted friends and neighbors as we proceeded along the crowded sidewalks. We stopped at a variety of shops carefully selecting the ingredients for the evening meal. I recall the smells...pickles, herring, spices...all mingled together. Unlike the vast supermarkets of today, every merchant knew our names and we knew theirs. At the end of the week, when money grew scarce, we shopped at Nat Bloom's grocery. He was willing to allow families to buy on credit, and pay for their purchases when they received their salary checks.

Blue Hill Avenue became especially hectic on Friday mornings when Jewish homemakers shopped for Shabbat. The shocket, a butcher certified to slaughter and kosher poultry, lived at the end of Havelock Street. Women could be seen walking to the shocket's house carrying squawking chickens in baskets in their arms, and returning a short time later, their baskets covered with a towel. The pungent odor of burning feathers permeated the air. I was glad Mama bought our chickens from the butcher shop, but I do recall plucking the remaining pinfeathers from the wings and drumsticks before the chicken was soaked in salt water and prepared for roasting.

I remember Mama attaching a metal grinder to the edge of the kitchen table. I kneeled on a chair to crank the handle as she stuffed carp and whitefish into the grinder's cavity. The fish came out like long, fat worms dropping into the bowl below. It fascinated me that a mound of white worms could be transformed into delicious gefilte fish. I remember Mama grating the horseradish, wiping away the tears that sprung to her eyes with the corner of her apron.

I recall my delight when Mama let me punch down the challah dough after it had risen. She covered it with a dish towel and set it aside until, as if by magic, it began to rise again. When it was ready, she rolled it into three long strips from which she formed a braid before putting it into the oven.

Every Friday afternoon, when I returned from school, the house smelled of Pine Sol, wax and polish. Newspapers were strewn over the freshly scrubbed floor. The table was set with a starched and ironed white tablecloth. I remember the serenity on Mama's face as she lit the Sabbath candles, waved her arms over the flames, covered her eyes with her hands and recited the blessing aloud. When the blessing was finished, I could see her lips still moving in silent prayer, as she thanked God for her family's good health, and asked Him to watch over us for another week.

Most families walked proudly to the synagogue on Shabbat. We wore our finest clothing, reserved just for the occasion. We attended the Agudeth Israel Synagogue on Woodrow Avenue where the men sat down below and the women sat in the balcony above. I had to stand on my tip toes to peek through the openings of the lattice grille that separated us in order to watch the Torah being removed from the Ark.

The synagogue was the hub of social activity. Most holidays were celebrated as a community. Neighbors joined together to build and decorate several succahs on our street. Weather permitting, we ate our meals in the succah, under the azure sky during the day, and under the twinkle of stars in the moonlight at dinnertime.

The Hecht House (Jewish Community Center) was another facility where families joined together to share the traditions of our faith. During Chanukah, we gathered for a celebration at which we lit candles, sang songs, played the dreidel game and ate latkes. We returned to the Hecht House for the festive celebration of Purim. All the children dressed in costume and paraded around the social hall. When the storyteller recited the familiar tale of Haman and Queen Esther, we stamped our feet and twirled our greggors (noisemakers) at the sound of wicked Haman's name. Afterwards, we were treated to plump hamantashen stuffed with prunes or poppy seeds.

In our neighborhood, if one family had a simcha (a happy occasion) we all celebrated. Any occasion that had to do with Jewish family life ...the birth of a baby, a Bar Mitzvah, a college graduation, a wedding...was cause for festivity.

This same camaraderie held true when a family suffered the death of a loved one. Neighbors, family and friends, bearing food, filled the rooms of the shiva house (a house of mourning) and talked in hushed tones, sometimes crying and sometimes laughing as they recalled memories of the deceased.

Safety in one's home was not a concern. Everyone left their doors unlocked. Neighbors cared about each other. If someone became ill, someone from next door brought over soup; someone from downstairs watched the children. In Mama's kitchen, a plate of mandel bread was always on the table; a tea kettle on the stove, in readiness for a neighbor who might drop by to chat.

Mr. Lakin's candy store was the favorite place to gather after school. Mr. Lakin had a long beard and always wore a yarmulke (skull cap). He resembled a rabbi more than a merchant. My friends and I entered his shop; pennies clutched in our fists, and contemplated the variety of choices in the showcase. These included paper strips of multi colored candy dots, chunks of rock candy, molasses mary janes, tootsie rolls, licorice whips and double bubble gum wrapped in its own comic strip. If we were lucky enough to have a nickel, we could buy two small scoops of chocolate sherbet served in a soft paper cup which we squeezed from the bottom.

Around the corner from Lakin's, several blocks down on Talbot Avenue, was the Talbot Bowladrome, a favorite hang out for teens on the weekends.

Another local gathering place was the G&G Delicatessen on Blue Hill Avenue. During the day, elderly gentlemen could be found reading the Daily Forward Jewish newspaper and sipping tea from clear glasses with handles. They dipped sugar cubes into the hot brew and sucked the sweetness between their teeth. Local politicians recognized the significance of the G & G and held their political rallies there.

During the High Holy Days families strolled through Franklin Field. Teenage girls sat on the wall surrounding the field waiting for boys to come along and snap them on the legs with knotted handkerchiefs.

The Morton Theatre was the local movie house and Monday night was dish night when patrons not only got to see a movie, but received a dinner plate, cup, saucer or bowl as incentive to keep them coming back. The dishes Mama collected on dish night were the ones she used for Passover.

By today's standards, my family would be considered poor, but I never thought of myself in that way. Everyone in my neighborhood lived as we did. What we lacked materially, we made up for spiritually. Our days were spent, not only learning about the rich traditions of our heritage, but living it.

When I married, I was only eighteen, my husband twenty one. We vowed to carry on our religious heritage, not only for ourselves, but for our children. However, that was often difficult to do. My husband's occupation required him to work on Friday nights and Saturdays. The observance of Shabbat was not the same without him to share it.

As the children grew older, there were other obstacles as well. Living in an integrated neighborhood, I must admit that Little League practice, ballet class and the bowling league's schedule often took precedence over going to the synagogue on Saturday mornings

Holiday traditions, however, remained in tact with all our children, extended family and friends in attendance; the exceptions; the challah came from the bakery and the horseradish from a jar.

Like many couples of our generation, we moved to the suburbs for better schools and more opportunities for our children. Although the neighborhoods were nice, there was not the intimacy with our neighbors that we experienced in our youth. As more and more families moved away from the cities, the synagogues in those areas were forced to close, and new, more modern “temples” were built in the suburbs. Subsequently, the ethnic Jewish neighborhoods disintegrated, and with them, the loss of the Jewish communal lifestyle.

I recognize that the warmth and unique spirit of ethnic communal living, as I experienced it, is difficult to duplicate in today’s transient society. I do not regret that my children grew up in a diversified neighborhood where they learned to understand and respect the different religions and traditions of their peers. However, I am grateful that I was given such a memorable legacy.