

November 30, 1994

THE YOUNG MANHOOD OF NATHAN SPERO

(Not meant to be a parody of James Farrel)

In the late thirties, my family, consisting of an older sister, a younger brother and I, were living in Bath Beach, Brooklyn, having moved there after my mother died, to be near my aunt and uncle. My father had died many years ago.

My sister, just a few years older than I, was our major breadwinner, having both the brains and good fortune to finish on top of the list of the city's exam for teachers and therefore to be appointed to a teaching job. Teaching jobs during the great depression were considered the equivalent of owning a gold mine.

Our little family ate dinner together at home, perhaps gobbling up our dinner would be a better way of putting it, because we all had to get away quickly, my sister to take evening classes at Hunter in pursuance of a Masters degree, my brother to a makeshift delivery boy's job and I, who worked as a shipping clerk during the day, to my evening college classes.

When I was a boy I tried my mother's patience by eating so slowly that in her exasperation she would tell me to stop day-dreaming and eat. But these days, my fast-food experience in Bath Beach has evoked more than one friend of mine to express surprise at my speed in downing a meal.

My life in Bath Beach as a teen-ager was quite hectic, and while I can remember clearly individual events I had participated in, I find I can't group these events together in the order in which they actually occurred. But almost all of them took place in the narrow enclave of Bath Beach, a three block area bounded by Bensonhurst on the west and Gravesend Bay of the Atlantic Ocean on the east.

A major exception to my life in the Bath Beach locale was the shipping clerk job I had in downtown Manhattan. My employer set up book rental libraries in department stores throughout the country. He had developed a hand-operated machine that covered book jackets with cellophane so that books so-covered always looked new. He bought books from reviewers for a song, and supplemented them with publishers' remainders. He was a rather nice, soft-spoken person with whom I got along very well.

It was my job to pick up books from such reviewers as Clifton Fadiman, bind the cellophane to the book jackets, pack up the books going to department stores in crates and truck them down the elevator and over to the post office. It was hard work but I kept at it diligently, and my employer expressed his satisfaction with me many times, indicating that he was thinking of having me travel to the department stores to set up rental libraries and hire people to run them.

Alas, there was a city-wide strike of elevator operators and the real estate owners hired strikebreakers to run the elevators. There were crates of books waiting to be shipped, but we were on the sixth floor and the elevator had to be used. As a strong union sympathiser, I refused to use it. My employer had to truck the crates to the elevator and over to the post office himself.

After this incident his attitude toward me changed. He still treated me well but no longer spoke of new responsibilities. I saw the handwriting on the wall when he hired another shipping clerk and began breaking him in to the book business. Shortly thereafter I was laid off, ending my association with the book retailing business. Who knows, except for that strike, I might have become the Barnes and Noble of the 1930's.

Nazi war clouds were hovering over Europe . Concerned American citizens set up an organization, The American League Against War

and Fascism, to meet the Nazi threat. A branch of the League met evenings in a little cheddar building which it rented from a large Jewish temple on 86th Street.

I was attracted to the American League because it included in its membership many of the neighborhood's young intellectuals who organized lectures, forums and plays. I was nominated to be chairman and agreed to serve when others who had been nominated declined the so-called honor because of the administrative chores the job required.

We staged such anti-war, pro-labor plays as Irwin Shaws' BURY THE DEAD and Clifford Odets' WAITING FOR LEFTY. One of our members, Artie E, whose full time work was acting as a master of ceremonies at various affairs, wrote a one-act play, very much resembling the strike theme in WAITING FOR LEFTY. He actually dedicated the play to me and insisted that I play the leading role, a strike leader kidnapped by the employer.

I was strapped to a chair with my back to the audience and a gag in my mouth, conveying to the audience my refusal to betray the strike by wriggling in my fetters and making muffled sounds through the gag.

Even when unfettered and ungagged, I am probably one of the worst actors in the world. The sympathetic audience booed what I thought at the time was the rascally employer, but the wisdom of hindsight leads me to think that the booing could very well been directed at my acting as well.

Serving as chairman, my conscience impelled me to a course of action I really dreaded to take. The major cinema in Bath Beach, the Loews Oriental, was showing as was customary, a feature film, a cartoon and a newsreel. But the Newsreel was a Hearst production white-washing the Nazi regime, presenting Nazi officials in a favorable light and praising Nazi "achievements".

About fifty of us picketed the theatre on a busy Friday night with signs and leaflets asking movie goers to boycott the theatre until it dropped the Hearst newsreels. Large crowds both of movie goers and onlookers gathered. The theatre management called the police and a dozen of us were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct, and unceremoniously carted off to jail.

In the process of arresting us , a policeman performed an act of cruelty which colors my feeling towards the police to this day. This was a policeman who patrolled our neighborhood and with whom we were on very friendly terms. We used to kid around with him and even join him in a friendly cup of coffee and donuts at the local diner. As we were being herded into the police vans, this very nice cop used his nightstick to bang the back of the head of one of the picketers, Norman Ross, as he was walking up the two steps to get into the van. I saw the entire deed; there was nothing that Normie, a good friend of mine, had done or said that could have provoked this brutal assault.

Norman Ross was never the same. He suffered violent headaches and memory lapses. He died two years later. My experience in court in this case before Judge O'Dwyer, later to become Mayor O'Dwyer, I leave for another time.

My social life in those days was interesting and varied. I was part of a coterie of teen agers whose acknowledged leader was Jack Weisberg and which met late every night in the FAMOUS CAFETERIA on nearby 86th Street. Jack , who claimed he was a socialist, was also a consummate raconteur and confidence man with a tremendous imagination.

We would have round table discussions on major issues of the day, with questions framed by Jack's inimitable imagination. The CIO's organizing drives were front page news. Jack would pose this question for discussion: Would it be more effective to

organize company unions first, and then try to convert them to bona fide unions? or would it be more effective to organize bona fide unions directly?

The Nazi cloud over Europe was worrisome. Jack, sitting in the FAMOUS CAFETERIA, proposed to telephone Hitler and and tell him off. Jack collected all the nickels and dimes we had among us and proceeded to put through a call to the German Chancellory. He actually got through to a high German official to whom he gave our message.

Jack's income came from travelling to city after city selling fake persian rugs and spark plugs. One day he disappeared , and when he came back his face had a pasty, white look. Through the grapevine we heard he had been found out and had spent a month in jail.

Jack could charm women. He would say something like, "you hve beautiful, brown eyes " and women would melt before his charm. His approach didn't work for me. I said to someoneone I really liked, "you have beautiful brown eyes" and she replied coldly, "My eyes are blue" and that was the end of that.

But I did meet a beautiful young woman Blanch Y with whom I shared a community of interests. We were both socialist, both intellectual, both movie lovers, and we shared other common interests. But it was not to be. She met someone else, a dental student with a real career whereas I appeared to have no prospects. She chose him over me.

Luckily for me, at just about that time my fortunes took a turn for the better. I got a job as a statistical clerk in the Labor Department in Philadelphia. This new start in a new city was a wonderful antidote to ~~my~~ heartburn. It was there that I met my wife, had a child , earned my Masters and acquired the experience to become research director of a national union.