

ACROSS FROM THE TAVERN BY Jack Lippman WHS, Class of 1950



Introduction:

Most evenings during the week, at about ten o'clock, my father would take a walk down to the corner of Meeker and Elizabeth Avenues, across from the Tavern Restaurant. Occasionally, I went with him. Although there wasn't a newsstand in front of the drugstore, you could buy a paper there late in the evening from a man who set out piles of the earliest editions of the Daily News and the Daily Mirror on a plank of wood resting on two wooden milk bottle cases.

The bundled New York papers were dropped from a truck shortly after ten every evening, and by eleven, they were usually sold out to people who were standing there waiting for them to arrive, people who wanted an early glance at the next morning's headlines, the late daytime sports scores, or tomorrow's entries at the race tracks. It sticks in my mind, aromatically, that a lot of the men waiting for the papers there were smoking cigars.

My father, who bought the Mirror, did it to read Walter Winchell. True, Winchell's column would appear the next morning in the Newark Star-Ledger, but it was nice to have it the evening before. We didn't get the Star-Ledger in the morning anyway since my father brought the Newark Evening News home from work in the evening.

There was something about Walter Winchell that appealed to Jews in middle-class neighborhoods in the early 1940s. They listened to him every Sunday night when he spoke on the radio to "Mr. and Mrs. North and South America and all the ships at sea," as well as dutifully reading his newspaper column which the war had transformed from a showbiz gossip column to a supposed insider's view of what was going on in the war to defeat Hitler, tormentor of the Jews.

The Mirror and the Newark Evening News are long out of business. Jerry, the newspaper man's teenage son, who occasionally was there selling papers instead of his father, ultimately was drafted and died on D-day on the beaches of Normandy. His

name appeared in the daily casualty listings in the Newark papers. I remember my father pointing out Jerry Bernstein's name to me there.

There were other corners where you could buy newspapers at night. A guy named Louie set up a stand every Saturday night over on Lyons Avenue at the corner of Bergen Street. He wasn't there with the News or Mirror during the week, but on Saturday night, you could get early editions of all of the Sunday papers, including the New York Times, the Herald Tribune, the Star Ledger, the Sunday Call (which was what the Newark Evening News was called on Sundays), the Journal American and even the Sunday tabloid News or the Mirror. Most of the customers at that corner drove by and bought their paper through their car windows, calling out their choice, "Mirror, Louie, keep the change."

There was a big newsstand downtown on the broad sidewalk in front of the Public Service Electric and Gas Company headquarters building. There was a canopy overhead because many bus lines, including those going into Manhattan, stopped there to pick up and discharge passengers. A hunchbacked old man, in scruffy gray clothes and always wearing the same worn cap, spread out the Newark and New York papers on the sidewalk against the building, along with a collection of magazines. I didn't have occasion to buy papers from the old man, but I did see him there when we went downtown to take a bus into Manhattan to go to a museum or to see a Broadway show. This was before the 107 line running down Lyons Avenue all the way into New York City was started.

I had a classmate in high school who was more or less peripheral to the gang I usually hung out with. But occasionally, he went to movies or dances with us. One evening, we went over to Milty's house to pick him up and to my surprise, when I was introduced to his father, I recognized the scruffy old man who sold papers at the bus terminal. Clean-shaven, standing more erect, and wearing a clean sport shirt and neatly pressed slacks, he looked like another person. I never got to know Milty very well. I do remember, however, that he was the first member of Weequahic High School's class of 1950 to die. Some were casualties of the Korean War, which started in that year we graduated, but Milty died very unexpectedly of heart failure. His obituary in the Newark Evening News was a brief one.

High School graduation in Newark's high schools took place twice a year, in January and in June. The senior class, therefore, was divided in 4As and 4Bs, the As being the next class to graduate and the Bs scheduled to get their diplomas five or six months later. Hence there were two classes of 1950 at Weequahic High School, the January and the June classes. I was in the June class which, so far as I know, didn't include anybody who became famous. February 1950, however, was a different story. Among its members was Philip Roth, perhaps the leading writer of his generation. In fact, I used to have an autographed first edition of "Goodbye Columbus" which I lent to someone. I never got it back but it didn't matter to me at the time since who knew in those days that Phil would become famous. I even knew the real names of some of the people upon whom the characters in the book were based and to this day, when I read a Roth novel, the Newark locales strike a familiar chord.

And speaking of Newark locales, and getting back to the corner where my father went to pick up the Mirror, I had mentioned the Tavern Restaurant across from the drugstore. We didn't eat there very often since it was a rather expensive place. Though I never was really certain, I had the feeling that, during Prohibition, it had been a speakeasy frequented not only by locals, but by visitors from New York City. Some of the windows were stained glass and the interior of the restaurant was comprised of a series of sedate wood-paneled rooms and in those days, when smoking was still generally acceptable, the not always unpleasant aroma of cigar smoke. The Tavern was the kind of place you got dressed up to visit on special occasions and the kind of place where it was not unlikely that you might encounter someone who looked like a racketeer.

The summer after my freshman year at Rutgers-Newark, where incidentally Philip Roth was in my English class before he transferred to Bucknell, I worked for a company that manufactured overhead doors. It was a boring factory job and I wasn't unhappy when some of the summer help was laid off at the end of July. Looking in the want ads of the Newark Evening News, I found a job for the rest of the summer as a busboy in a hotel in Sharon Springs in upstate New York, a small town with a sulphur spa to which elderly people, mostly Jews, went to cure their ills. The hotel was a penny-pinching operation, run by a family of Cubans, employing kids from the Newark area for the summer. By the end of July, some had quit and I was part of the replacement crew for which they had advertised in the News.

It was a six hour drive to Sharon Springs in those days before the Thruway was built and the hotel owner's sister drove three of us up in her DeSoto. For most of the trip up, the hot summer sun was on our left; and fortunately I was sitting on the right side of the car. Next to me was Ralph, a skinny, chain-smoking kid in his early twenties whose mother was a waitress at the Tavern Restaurant and who assured me I would have no trouble being a busboy. His mother had gotten him busboy jobs in several Newark places and he was going to be a replacement waiter at the hotel.

"You know, when a waiter drops a steak on the floor in a restaurant kitchen, even in a place like the Tavern," he explained, "they just pick it up, wipe it off and put it back on a plate."

While telling me about the ins and outs of waiting table, Ralph had his right arm resting on the bottom of the open window for most of the trip. Those were the days when the only way to air-condition a car was to keep the windows open. I asked him if he wanted any suntan cream, but things like that didn't seem to concern Ralph. By the time we got to Sharon Springs, his arm was as red as a beet. It took him about a week to recover from the sunburn. He couldn't even lift a tray for a couple of days. Anyway, we quit our jobs the next week and finished the summer working in the dining room of the Hotel Adler, Sharon Springs' finest hotel, which is not saying very much.

Ten years later, I encountered Ralph in a rather nice restaurant in North Jersey. He was nattily attired in a red jacket and appeared to be a very accomplished waiter. He

thought he recognized me and politely came over to the table where my wife and I were dining and asked if I were the Jack he had worked with in Sharon Springs a decade earlier. Confirming that I was, and after a brief hello, he asked if I were a doctor because there was a sick customer at another table. I told him that I wasn't and wondered if the poor guy had gotten sick from eating a steak Ralph had dropped on the floor. That is the last I saw of Ralph. For all I knew at that time, he could still be wiping off the steaks he picks up from the floors of some of the finest restaurants in New Jersey. But maybe not.