

LIFE IN ROCKAWAY

By Robert Stern

Somehow or other my parents heard of a family, the Weinbergers, in Rockaway, in the village of Arverne, who were willing to rent an apartment in their home. We moved in ten days after our arrival in New York. The house on Beach 68th street was just yards from the boardwalk that ran for miles paralleling the beach. On a stormy day one could hear the surf from the front porch.

The Weinbergers were a 50 something couple with roots in Eastern Europe. Their accents were pure lower east side where they had grown up. Their house was big enough to accommodate us on the second floor as well as their son Danny and his family. During July and August they rented two other rooms to the Olings from the Bronx who came out every year to be near the beach. The two Oling boys were a few years older than me, attending college. The elder one had been struck by polio and was painfully deformed, his face twisted so that one could barely understand what he was saying. But otherwise he was OK and seemed to live a fairly normal life. Lenny, the younger one was a strapping, handsome boy, more than six feet tall. People wondered how his older brother might have looked if not for the polio.

The Weinbergers were one of the first to own a TV (this was early 1947) with a 7 inch black and white screen. Mr. Weinberger loved to watch wrestling every night even though it was more comedy entertainment than sport. Nevertheless he believed that it was totally legitimate. He invited us to join him watching the choreographed bouts featuring caped and masked competitors. He owned a produce store in Arverne. My parents were very fond of the Weinbergers and kept in touch with them for years after we moved out of their house. Danny took me to buy my first winter jacket from a store on the lower east side.

Arverne had a considerable Jewish population many of them orthodox. There were two synagogues, both orthodox. Derech Emunah, with its classic architecture was traditional but modern. The one that the Weinbergers attended was more along the lines of an eastern European *shtiebl*. My father felt obliged to become a member and on the High Holidays I worshiped with him there. The rest of the year I attended Derech Emunah, just down the street from our house. There was a weekly boys *minyán* and once a year we led the services in the main sanctuary. The boys each had a role, mine being to give the sermon. I'm not sure what that signified, whether I was a good speaker or that I was not versed enough to be able to chant and lead the Hebrew part of the service.

I attended Hebrew School on Sunday morning at Derech Emunah, learning Hebrew language and torah and whatever else one could cram into three hours of instruction a week. It was not a yeshiva. All the orthodox boys went to Far Rockaway High School. At that time only the most committed Jews, most of whom lived in Brooklyn, attended a day school yeshiva, which were few in number. (Neither my father nor I ever attended a yeshiva, nor did we think attending yeshiva was necessary to preserve our commitment to Judaism).

There was also a social element to belonging to this boys group. Mr. Samet would organize sports activities such as basketball games. Once a year he was able to acquire tickets to a basketball game in Madison Square Garden – the old garden on 50th street and Eighth avenue – which we would attend as a group. And not just any tickets. At the college All Star game in 1949 we all sat in the front row at courtside. Today those seats would cost in the four figure range. During a scramble under the basket Red Rocha, one of the hoop stars, was elbowed in the mouth and one of his teeth fell out on the court not far from me. Almost immediately a time out was called and as the teams went to their benches I walked out on the court to retrieve the tooth. One of the referees came over to see what I was doing and helped me to locate the tooth. It was embedded in pink plastic, evidently a false tooth. I kept it for years as a souvenir. Years later at a college tournament in Pullman, Washington, I was chatting with a very tall man who said he was the coach at the University of Hawaii. It turned out to be Rocha, who had a brief career in the NBA. I told him that I had retrieved a false tooth that he had lost at the All Star game. He did not ask me to return it.

We also attended the final of the 1950 NIT tournament. Good seats but not as close as for the All Star game. That game was won by CCNY over Bradley. CCNY had four sophomores and one senior starter. Freshmen were not eligible then. So it was a relatively inexperienced team but they were incredibly good. The starters were three Jews and two Blacks all locals from the five boroughs of New York. I was attending Brooklyn College; by then and CCNY was our biggest rival. Still I rooted for the local team. Of course the rest of the Garden was pulling for the home team too, enthusiastically participating in the Alligaroo cheer that was its hallmark.

Two weeks later the same two teams played each other in the finals of the NCAA tournament and CCNY won again, the only time that the same team had won both post season events. This time I watched the game on a neighbors TV set. Since then no team has been invited to both tourneys in the same year so the double championship is unique and will never be repeated. Unfortunately the next year the team was caught taking bribes from gamblers and players were barred from playing again. It was a sad end to what might have been a repeat championship and it ruined New York college basketball.

As soon as I was settled in Arverne I became a big sports fan. In those days most of us were Brooklyn Dodger fans though there were Giant and Yankee supporters too. I was also an avid Ranger fan and went to several games a year. In those days one could purchase a side balcony ticket for 70 cents. One could not see the whole ice surface except if you sat in the first two rows. However, for \$1.25 one could sit in the end balcony where one could see the whole ice. It was a long climb to the balcony but it was certainly affordable and it was never sold out. I had no interest in professional football but would occasionally go to a Knickerbocker game. The NBA used to play double headers because fans were not coming out to see the pros. How pathetic was attendance? Half the games were played in the 69th regiment armory with a capacity of 5,000 seats.

What was popular was college football and specially basketball. I used to keep my own top 20 college football ratings and update those every week based on which team had won or lost. Unfortunately one could not see the best games because there were no major conferences in New York. It was not until I moved to Seattle that I was able to attend University of Washington games played against top ranked competitors.

Madison Square Garden was the mecca of college basketball in the late 40s. There were more than twenty double headers played every season with the four local teams – CCNY, NYU, LIU and St. Johns – taking on the best schools in the country. Manhattan, St. Francis and Fordham were a tier below these four. And the players were almost all home grown. Very few players left New York for out of town colleges.

When I registered for high school the fall term had already begun. After testing me the school placed me in the 10th grade, a sophomore. I was still only 13 and the rest of the class was one year older. Apparently the British school system was more advanced so that I was ahead of children my age at Far Rockaway high. That did not translate into better grades as I continued my lazy lack of effort that had characterized me in French and British schools. (I did not become a straight A student until graduate school when I was in my late thirties). However it did make a difference in my social life. Since everyone was a year older I found it hard to compete in sports and found it difficult to date girls who were my peers. I don't think I went out on a date until I was a senior. By then I was just 16.

The school was 99% White (now it's 90% Black) and at least 80% Jewish. Most of the teachers were similarly Jewish. Class size was 35 and still we got an excellent education. The majority of the kids went on to college. Nobody seemed to be concerned about "overcrowded" classrooms. During PT most played basketball while I ran around the circular inside track. I was not much into team sports except for softball. We had swimming class once a week. We were not issued nor were we allowed bathing suits. It was boys only and we swam naked. I think the girls wore bathing suits but of course their swimming class was off limits.

I did like to attend my high school's football games played on Saturday afternoons. Since I was not allowed to take a bus I had to walk to and from the game with a ticket bought in advance, a distance of about three miles, most of it along the boardwalk. I did not mind. We had gorgeous cheerleaders and I fell in love with one, Rita Zerkowitz, a raven haired beauty.

I joined a few clubs such as the chess club and the math club. It was not the happiest time of my life. I felt awkward and out of place. My two best friends were David Riesman – whose namesake wrote *The Lonely Crowd* that was published at the time – and Ray Roodberg. David lived in Arverne and was orthodox. We played a form of racquetball with tennis racquets against a wall that was primarily used for handball. We also strapped on skates and played roller hockey in an empty parking lot. Raymond lived in Laurelton. He invited me to his house on a couple of occasions where his father would express the most viciously racist, anti Negro opinions to me. The Roodbergs were Jewish but

changed their name to Rhodes when Raymond was a senior, in order to pass as gentile. Raymond, who wanted to be an engineer, was an excellent student and was accepted at Oklahoma which was still segregated at the time. They don't allow "boogies" or "coons" he explained to me. Maybe they didn't allow Jews either.

One of my best friends was Murray Budabin, the valedictorian of our class. Or so I thought. Murray was admitted to Harvard where he was going to study to be a doctor. His passion in high school was science fiction which he read and also wrote. Almost 50 years later the school held a reunion to mark its hundred year anniversary. After getting Murray's phone number from directory assistance ("I have a doctor Budabin, a psychiatrist on Park Avenue") I called him to find out if he was coming to the reunion. He began screaming at me as soon as I had identified myself, calling me names and saying he had always disliked me. I found this odd since I had not spoken to him in almost fifty years and could not remember what had caused this enmity. It was either a case of mistaken identity or a psychiatrist gone haywire.

Arverne and Rockaway were fairly dead for nine months of the year, the beach and the boardwalk deserted, the penny arcades closed, the bungalow colonies padlocked. But on Memorial Day the summer guests began to flood in. They arrived from the five boroughs but mostly from Brooklyn and the Bronx. They were almost exclusively Jewish. Houses along the street were jammed with the summer crowd as private homes began to look like rooming houses. The women and children spent the day at the beach, the former playing cards, usually canasta, or mah jong on the front porch. The men commuted from Manhattan where they worked and arrived by train early in the evening to join their family. Then they changed into a bathing suit, took a dip in the ocean and dressed again for supper. The men tended to play poker or pinochle.

The best part was the influx of high school girls about my age. They planted themselves on beach blankets and lathered up with suntan oil. At that time there was no sunscreen and the object was to get the best tan possible and not block the sun at all. Middle aged ladies would sit for hours holding up a contraption to their face which reflected the sun from a silver coated surface onto their skin. The teenagers wore bikinis which quite modestly covered belly buttons. The string bikini had yet to be invented. Yet there was enough skin exposed to get our male hormones raging. In the evening we reassembled on the boardwalk in large groups and flirted. This consisted telling jokes, nudging, throwing your arms around a girls shoulder, but that's as far as it went. The older girls were on the lookout for college men who might have a car which we, without wheels, could only crave. About the only seduction that occurred was asking a girl to go to the movies with us. There was an outdoor cinema on the boardwalk where we sat on benches and prayed it would not rain.