

Changing Tides: A Life

BILL FINK

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To Janet,
Looking back can be
both joyful and painful.
I hope you enjoy some of the
things that I remember from
long ago.

Love,
Uncle Bill

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Chapter 1

First Impressions

I was excused from school that day. Attending a funeral was never questioned by my teacher as long as she received a note from my mother. Who was the relative in my family who so thoughtfully gave me the day off? I don't know. But I clearly remember what I wore. I must have been 6 or 7 years old, it was winter, and my parents did not think I was ready for long pants. I had to endure the embarrassment of wearing shorts and long, heavy knit stockings. My Uncle Mitch commented on my attire to my parents and I think that was the last time you saw Billy in long stockings. And so it was off to kindergarten and elementary school!

P.S. 177 was about 4 blocks from our apartment house which was #6413 on 24th Ave. in

Bensonhurst. But those few blocks turned out to be one of the longest, nerve wracking, stomach churning walks I can remember. This, in spite of the fact that my mom walked next to me, holding my clammy little hand in hers. Sure enough, within 1 block of the school, like clockwork, every morning, I threw up. And then we bravely soldiered on until I was inside P.S. 177.

One of the things I remember clearly in my elementary school career was being hauled before Miss Palermo with another boy and receiving a whack across the head for being unruly. If Miss Palermo taught me anything it was: "Keep quiet – and stay in your seat!"

In a couple of years, I reached 6th grade without any further confrontations. And there I fell in love with Mrs. Lichtenstein, my official teacher. Mrs. L. was not particularly pretty, wore glasses perched

high up on her nose, and her hair was always swept up in the back, tied in a bun. But she always listened, was easy to approach, always had a smile for me, and she was my favorite. And miracle of miracles, I was chosen by her to play the lead in our final school play prior to going on to junior high. All I remember about the play was that I wore a big blue cape and won the girl's hand.

During lunch, recess, and sometimes after school, I played second base for our softball team and still remember, with pride, the coaches complimenting me on a good throw to first to get the guy out. We lost the game.

On the very last day of school before summer vacation began, we were handed our report cards. On the front of each was written the name of the junior high we were assigned to, and the new official class. I stuffed the card in my pocket and

hurried home because at 3 o'clock I was playing in a street punch ball game and I had to change into my beloved sneakers. As I rushed out the door, I passed the report card to my big sister, Roz, and as the door slammed I heard Roz shout, "Mom, Billy made the R's!" The R stood for RAPID, a system that was designed for achieving students who could complete 2 terms of work in one term. I think the only reason I made the R's was by listening to Miss Palermo's admonition – "Keep quiet – and stay in your seat!"

Chapter 2

Rockaway Baby

I think I must have been about 6 years old when my family and aunts & uncles began to "go to the tents" in Rockaway when schools closed. In the thirties, during the height of the depression, some shrewd real estate person erected large canvas tents on wooden platforms, on the beautiful Rockaway beach and these were rented out for the summer to families from the city. For 4 or 5 years, every summer was spent in "the tents." What a wonderful, magical time for a kid from Bensonhurst! My family always chose a tent in the first line, i.e., nothing stood between our tent and the Atlantic Ocean save for a modest stretch of beach. And when, on occasion, a full moon coincided with a high tide, the ocean came across the beach and swirled around under the platform

supporting our tent! And yes, there were times when the water came into out tent! The brooms came out and Mom, Roz, & Aunt Tillie furiously swept the invading ocean back out to sea.

Meanwhile, my Dad and Uncle Al were not there to help. They stayed in the city from Monday to Friday, working and trying to earn enough to pay the last installment on the tents.

Every Friday night, the "men" would come to our tent from the hot city. They took the LIRR after work, and after a long, slow ride through East New York the tracks finally led to the trestle bridge over Jamaica Bay and thence to the Rockaways. I think our stop was "Arverne" or "Hamels" but those Friday nights were special! During the day our tent was filled with the most delicious and tantalizing smells one could imagine. Yes, the tents had stoves and ice boxes, so Mom and Aunt Tillie (was

Grandma there?) baked challah and cakes, roasted plump chickens, and made wonderful stews all in preparations for the “men” returning from the hot city for a weekend with their loved ones. And then on Sunday night, my Dad and Uncle Al, walked back on the primitive board “walks” to the LIRR that took them back to the city. I’d like to think that the salt air, the pounding ocean, the home cooked food, and the clamoring kids and cousins, gave them a jolt that would tide them over till the next magical weekend at “the tents.”

During the week, we were in the ocean for as long as our parents let us stay in. We dug for clams, picked up large moon snails, and swallowed vast amounts of salt water. In the front of our tent, Roz & I planted a small garden. I remember planting lima beans and they grew like crazy. I have an old fading snapshot of Roz and I standing in the lima

bean garden and next to me is a pole with a handmade banner that said "Billy".

I was maybe seven, eight or nine when sex entered the picture. The tents had outhouses that were reached by the board "walks". These privies were a fair distance from the tents and were a bit isolated. I clearly remember being in a stall with a boy that I'd seen around. He was very dark skinned, with fine features, and could have been from India or one of the Caribbean Islands. Both of us had our bathing trunks down around our knees and we stared at each other for a long time. Then I took the initiative and attempted to insert my wormlike penis into his bony backside. We giggled and reversed the order. The failed attempt ended with the sound of approaching footsteps and a hasty retreat back to the tents seemed in order.

There are special sounds, smells, and tastes that once in awhile, at the oddest moments, force their

way into my memory and remind me of the days spent in the tents. I clearly remember the sesame candy vendor, a dark skinned smallish man in a jacket, tie, and straw hat, strolling on the beach with a tray of sticky sesame bars balanced on his head. I see similar confections today and they always remind me of the man in the straw hat.

Chapter 3

Illness Takes Charge

My Dad began a long series of visits to Memorial Hospital to be treated for a rare form of cancer called von Recklinghausen disease (now known as neurofibromatosis type 1). He would be in for a few days and then come home wan and weak from the treatment. At one point the doctors were ready to amputate his leg, but chose another course of excruciatingly painful treatments involving injections of who knows what. I was in his room during one treatment and will never forget his screams and writhing. I stood there frozen, unable to yell, "Stop it!" The guilt still lingers after all those years.

And how did the bills get paid? The eminent Dr. Pack, who was my Dad's surgeon, and a sort of

God in our family's estimate (his later reputation somewhat tarnished by rumors of performing unnecessary amputations) must have had a compassionate side to him since we were on relief (now called Welfare) at the time, and my family probably paid him in dribs and drabs.

Mom would walk blocks to save a penny or two on vegetables and fruit. A penny or a nickel saved meant an awful lot to her. To this day, when I spy a penny on the sidewalk, my heart jumps as I bend down to pick up the treasure.

My Dad came home from Memorial Hospital, wan and weak, for a few weeks of convalescence. Mom ordered an extra fine chicken from Scheckter the butcher to make a good, rich chicken soup for Dad. But the bird was tough and stringy, and the soup thin. Mom was fit to be tied and strode into

the small butcher shop and let Scheckter have it! I had never seen her so angry as on that day!

Perhaps because of the stress going on in the house at the time, i.e., Dad out of work, the family on relief, Mom always complaining of shortness of breath and very hard of hearing, my first year in junior high was a disaster. Math was my nemesis, but I also did poorly in other subjects to the extent that I could not keep up with the class and found myself out of the "R" track at the end of the term and placed in a regular class. What a relief!

During the remaining uneventful years at Seth Low Junior High, one incident stands out in my memory. There was one kid in my class who was tough - he wore a leather jacket! – and he took pleasure in pushing, taunting, and shoving me around while standing in line. One day during lunch break in the schoolyard he began again and a circle of girls and boys formed around us to

watch. I guess my brain and body said "Enough!" and with a wild swing and shove, I knocked my tormentor to the ground. I sort of remember some blood on his lip and nose and his changed expression as he sat there for a moment. I walked away with my friends feeling both amazed at my reaction to his taunts, and also relieved that he would not cause any more grief for me.

The Brilliant High School Student

Towards the end of my junior high years I had to make a choice since high school was my next step on the education ladder. The word "college" was never seriously considered as an option in my family. First, we were down at the heels financially. Secondly, my grades were not good enough to get me into one of the city colleges. So we began to think, and talk about, learning a trade in a vocational high school.

Soooo, what trade? Auto mechanics was too dirty—and who ever heard of a Jewish grease monkey? Other trades—air conditioning, food services, plumbing, printing, etc. all had drawbacks.

And then, out of the blue, my aunt Sadie, she of the haughty, educated, pseudo-English affected style of speaking, mentioned that a friend of hers (an indication of the circle she traveled with) was the principal of Brooklyn High School for Specialty Trades. Not only that, but a new course in optical mechanics was being offered for the first time.

Now it so happened that my Dad and a distant relative of his were once in the optical business, many years ago. (Is there anything my Dad didn't do to make living?) So this trade immediately appealed to the entire family—clean, had a professional sound to it, and it was a brand new course!

The school's main building was on Flatbush Ave. Ext. about a block from the entrance to the Manhattan Bridge. Two blocks away was an annex where the specialty trades—watch making,

jewelry, and optical mechanics were taught. I took the elevated Culver line to get to school every day and clearly remember the pot-bellied stove going full blast in the waiting room during severe winters. In the summer, the windows went down in every car and you could even stand on the small platforms between cars while it rocked and rolled between stations. It was cool—literally and figuratively.

I began getting terrific grades in all my subjects, much to my (and my parents) amazement. It wasn't that my brain suddenly went into overdrive, but rather that the majority of vocational high school students then were dropouts, misfits, problematic, etc., and were dumped into vocational high schools because regular (academic) high schools would not take them. So, an average kid like me, who could read, write, and understand most things, blossomed and stood out in that school.

Attending high school was a joy. I remember having dinner with my parents and Roz in our tiny kitchen and recounting the amazing things I had learned that day in high school. Mr. Silver, our science teacher (soon to be killed in action flying over Germany) presented us with astounding facts: Newton's theory, physical properties of matter, the pull of gravity, etc., etc. What an amazing world there was out there!

And June Gruber! June was a zaftig high school senior that traveled in a different crowd - Boro Park, no less! She went to New Utrecht High School and was in a "fast" crowd. We met (I think) on the beach near the handball courts and I was smitten.

There were two distinct groups on the beach. One group was from New Utrecht High and Boro Park,

sort of snooty and using a silent language between them that excluded us. Us were the guys from Bensonhurst, with me attending Brooklyn High School for Specialty Trades (VOCATIONAL!!) and other riff raff. Joe Stein, a very good friend (I was best man at his wedding) wore a CCNY track team T-shirt, a real plus that made him a cut above the rest of us.

But my moment was coming. It was around that time (1943-44) that Cooper Union offered a free course in optical engineering. Since there was a severe shortage of trained people in this and other technical fields, I enrolled and was accepted. I bought the required texts—very, very technical—and tried to complete the weekly assignments but it was tough. I think I received a D in the course, but it wasn't a total loss because in addition to the books, I purchased a Cooper Union T-shirt! And when next I joined the gang on the beach, I was no

longer the boy who went to a VOCATIONAL school, no, I went to Cooper Union!

The war years found me in high school and when I graduated, I began looking for a job in the optical trade. I landed one in a small factory that through a government contract made and assembled aviator goggles. My job title was that of an "edger". An edger stood in front of a large, rotating carborundum wheel. A steady drip of water fell on its surface. On a small table next to it sat a small slotted tray containing twenty to thirty green aviator lenses. These had been cut beforehand by a couple of skilled German refugees from a single large concave sheet of green glass! My job was to grind (edge) and bevel the rough cut lens so that it fit perfectly into the well-known aviator metal frame. When the tray was full, it was sent to a group of women who, with optical screwdrivers, inserted the lenses in the frame, tightened the

screws, and then sent them to be inspected, before they were shipped to the Air Force overseas. These women were paid by the piece (I was paid \$20 per week, not bad for the times and a first job). If the lenses were a bit too large or a bit too small, back they went to the edger (me). This of course, cut into the pay of the women. One day, after being on the job for about a month, one of the women walked over to my stand and gave me a big box of chocolates. It wasn't my birthday so I wasn't sure what it was for. She said my trays of lenses were so perfect that they were turning out more finished goggles thereby earning more in take home pay. I went home that day looking at the world through rose colored glasses.

Chapter 5

“You’re in the Army Now”...

In 1944, I turned eighteen, registered for the draft, and was called up for duty in September. My New York City group was sent to Camp Blanding for infantry basic training, supposedly for 16 weeks. Blanding was in a remote southern forest in Florida, complete with swamps, palmettos, scrub pine, and endless dirt roads. Most of the guys in my company were farm boys from the deep South who had all the prejudices against city guys one would expect.

I remember one tall, gangling G.I. in my barracks who took pleasure in calling me “Jew Boy.” One evening, as we were ready to turn in, he said it again. I waited until he was in bed, picked up my rifle by the barrel, and walked over to his bunk.

Everyone in the barracks watched, transfixed. Standing over his bunk, I remember saying, "If you ever say that to me again, one night, when you're sleeping, I'm going to bash your head in with this rifle." That good ol' boy never bothered me again.

The Battle of the Bulge broke out in Europe and our training was cut short to 10 weeks. We were needed as replacements immediately and were issued live ammo belts with grenades, and were ordered to board a transport that took us to Bremen, Germany. As soon as we disembarked, we were told to clamber up a waiting Sherman tank and hold on!

The entire scene was terrifying to four New York City eighteen year olds, fresh out of high school. Our tank (we had never seen a single tank in basic training) was a monster of a war machine, roaring,

clanking, moving with sudden jerks and spasms, difficult to hold onto.

But hold on we did. We entered a small village during the night looking for a few houses that were still intact that would provide us with a place to sleep.

Suddenly, shots rang out, and bullets started whizzing around us! In a comedy of errors, we discovered that my ammo belts that were attached to my pack were firing off rounds due to the intense heat of the exhaust vents. I had taken off my heavy pack and unwittingly placed it directly on top of the exhaust vents which were as hot as hell. The rounds went off as if it was the Fourth of July, my pack started to smolder & smoke, and finally burst into flames at which point we kicked it onto the ground.

Now everything I owned - everything! - was in that pack. Mess kit, sleeping bag, toilet articles, socks, underwear - gone! I remember that evening meal well. I stood in the mess line holding the bottom half of a mess kit (that I was lucky to scrounge) and received, one on top of another, dinner. First came meat, then some veggies, then on top of that mashed potatoes with gravy, and finally on top of it all, canned peaches! It was delicious.

That night, I slept with my first woman, a young fraulein living in one of the houses we occupied. The second I touched her, it was over. I remember her giggling and saying "das kaput". Talk about a red face!

I was in the 3rd Armored Division, the "Spearhead" division, commanded by General Abrams, probably the only Jewish general in WWII. Each morning our column of tanks and half tracks

wound through one bombed out town after another. In the evening, our tanks lined up side by side, raised their howitzers and fired round after round at an unseen enemy. I vividly remember climbing up to the turret where a big fifty caliber machine gun was mounted and firing rounds of tracer bullets into the black night. Did any hit an intended enemy soldier? Who knows?

Since my sleeping bag was part of the burning mess that we kicked off our tank, I sorely needed one. The quartermaster directed me to a big pile of bags and told me to pick one. I pulled one out of the stack and it was covered with blood. One after another yielded the same result. I finally found one that was more or less unstained. Later I learned that the bloody bags belonged to G.I.s killed, or wounded, in action.

A few days later, I began to feel a bit woozy. I reported to the medics who gave me a thorough exam and ordered me to immediately lie down on a stretcher! I protested and began to walk away when two medics grabbed me and forced me down on a stretcher. It was mumps! – a souvenir from my little fraulein.

And thus began a long sojourn for me, a man without a company and hospitalized to boot. My outfit had moved on and for a couple of months (having fallen through the cracks of the Army) I did not receive a single piece of mail and nary a package from home. Talk about homesickness-

Chapter 6

War's Over!

F.D.R. died in 1945 and in May of that year Nazi Germany surrendered and the war was over! By that time I was reunited with my company and I vividly remember, in the waning days of the war, liberating a small concentration camp and staring at the pajama clad prisoners on the other side of the chain link fence. This eighteen year old would later learn of the horrors of the Holocaust.

The system of getting the G.I.s home was simple: the ones with the longest service and the most points went home first. In June of 1946, my turn came. But while I was waiting for about a year, I came down with yellow jaundice (hepatitis). I was put in a special ward in a small but immaculate German hospital where we were urged to go to the

well equipped kitchen and eat as much ice cream, shakes, and malteds as often as we wanted. Heaven!

In the long months between the end of the war and the day I reported to the troopship that would take me home, I took advantage of the opportunity to obtain furloughs to France, England, and Switzerland. I met a charming woman in Paris, with whom I struck up a "relationship" with and whenever possible I mailed the extra rations and supplies that G.I.s received regularly to her. Her address was something Rue St. Augustine. I took a course in England that I think was called "camera repair" but turned out to be a course in building a camera similar to the "Speed Graphic"; the boxy camera with bellows favored by Weegee and other news photographers.

I built the case and that was it. But the stay in England (Blackpool) was another opportunity to see some of the country and also to meet a lovely red headed lass with whom I became friends.

In Bern, Switzerland, I received notice that I'd been promoted to Tech 4, that's 3 stripes with a T underneath. Wow! More pay! I went to a shop, purchased my new stripes, and wheedled a mature lady I met at a dance hall to sew them on.

I never knew why I was promoted.

Chapter 7

Welcome Home, Hero!

I clearly remember a few of my Army buddies on the day we were discharged in 1946. One was a tall gangly kid whose face was covered with pimples of the most glorious colors; reds, purples, magenta, and violet. His dad met us (I think in Penn Station) and he was so overwhelmed that he offered to buy new shoes, on the spot, for all of us! I don't remember anyone taking him up on his offer.

I took the train home (Sea Beach line) and when I walked into the lobby of our apartment house, there was a makeshift banner hung up from the ceiling that said "Welcome Home Billy".

The next few years were a blur of boredom, bar hopping on weekends, trying to score at dances, handball at the Coney Island courts followed with pitchers of beer at the Sands Bar & Grill across the street, taking over Troop 360 as scoutmaster and receiving a long kiss from a beautiful young lady (total stranger) the night I took over.

For the most part, these were wasted years. I had no focus, no interests and could not get started in anything meaningful.

At the same time, Roz was going through her own ordeal. She was in her thirties then, single but with one boyfriend, Jack Chall, who was a serious Communist. One night, Jack had dinner with us and after a long talk concerning wedding plans for Roz & Jack, Jack suddenly shot out of his chair and shouted that he would not change his political affiliations, ever - and stormed out of our

apartment into the street. Roz ran after him, I ran after Roz, there was hair pulling, breast-beating, shouting - what a scene on the streets of staid old Bensonhurst!

Eventually, they married & raised two kids in what was a somewhat strained relationship.

Chapter 8

Learning the Trade

One day, wandering around the city aimlessly, I found myself on 23rd St. which was one of the centers for the optical trade. I remembered that I had visited Gramercy Optical Company a few times to buy a few frames while I was in high school, and so I walked up to their office. I received a warm greeting from Hugo and Henry, the owners, and after chatting awhile about my army experiences they offered me a job! Wow! And so began my long apprenticeship as a benchman, the key technician in the optical business. I was good at the job, learned quickly, became active in the union, and quickly became good friends with a young man who was a stock clerk in the front office. Freddy and I decided to open our own wholesale optical business with me

doing all the technical shop work, while Freddy (a superb salesman) went out to snare new accounts. After a couple of years, Freddy talked me into changing the business into a strictly supply house mode, i.e., we sold lenses and frames to retail stores (optometrists and opticians). And so we sold our machines and I went out on the road with my sample case, hating every minute of it. We eventually split and I bought a going ophthalmic dispensing practice which turned out to be a loser. It was during this time that I maintained contact with my former teacher at Brooklyn High School for Specialty Trades, the school being within walking distance of my business. John Engel, my former teacher, was a journeyman lens grinder who switched jobs to become a vocational high school teacher. I followed that path, and after many years at night school at NYU and City College, received my degree and permanent teaching license. Then began a 26 year career

teaching a variety of subjects to begin with and winding up as an industrial arts teacher specializing in ceramics. Throughout this period I worked in the optical field as a journeyman benchman after school and during summer vacations to supplement my poor teachers salary.

Chapter 9

Europe Beckons

I think it was in the early Seventies that I qualified for a sabbatical. I was a tenured high school teacher at the time and Esther and I decided to do Europe!! We arranged to pick up a brand new Peugeot in Paris, tool it around Europe for about 4 months and then come home, with it, on a freighter. We planned to camp out whenever possible and stay in inexpensive (cheap) pensiones at other times. So we bought a small tent, air mattresses, compact cooking equipment, and off we went. We finally found the car dealer on the outskirts of Paris and drove off into the sunset in a sparkling new silver Peugeot sedan.

This trip also coincided with our introduction to French cuisine. I clearly remember the first night in

France. We had just crossed the English Channel at night and drove off into darkened Calais looking for a hotel, pensione, hostel - anything that offered a meal and a bed. And we found an inn (I think we woke up the innkeeper) who hastily put some food on a country table - cold chicken, bread, cheese, wine, a pear - delicious! We trundled up the stairs to a spare room with a big old bed and a feather comforter and quickly zonked out.

But the real awakening to French food occurred a few days later in Marseilles. We had guidebooks and in one of them was listed a very cheap hotel downtown (rough clientele, working class neighborhood, etc.) so we went there and took a room on the top floor for a couple of nights. The toilet (communal) was in the hall and our room was fairly close to it so we were privy to the privy with all of its gurglings and wafting odors.

Three or four other guests joined us for dinner in a room off the kitchen. The meal consisted of sliced sautéed veal, potatoes, a veggie, good bread and red wine. And then came the shocker. After the plates were cleared, we were served salad - a few very fresh greens and a marvelous vinaigrette. Now prior to this point, salad was served either before or with the main course, whether at home or in a restaurant. We soon found out that this was the order of serving in France, i.e., salad after the main course - of course!

And so we were gradually introduced to a new way of cooking, of serving, and of preparation. This meant that in France, as well as Europe in general, the ingredients for a meal were purchased, prepared, and consumed in one day!

We camped out when the weather was good and cooked some great meals on our tiny but

temperamental Swedish stove. The meals in auberges, pensiones and the like were simple: main course, salad, fruit & cheese - and wine - and bread - great stuff!

So we tooled around Europe, saw the main sights as well as off the beaten track spots (memorable) and towards the end of about four months prepared to go home with our not so shiny Peugeot 404 on a Yugoslav freighter. We were quickly running out of money, and just at this precise moment, the world financial system took a nose dive. Each morning we frantically ran to the bank to see if our request for a draft was approved. It was nail biting time. We had just received a telegram from the shipping company that our ship was leaving in two days from Genoa so we sped down there and made it!

And it was in Genoa that we had a meal I won't forget. Genoa is a rough, working-class port that for centuries was fought over because of its strategic position: shipping, trade, maritime industries including ship building, were its principal sources of revenue.

So, it was lunchtime! We strolled down a narrow cobblestone street—all streets led to the water—and around us were ships of all sizes and ships in various stages of loading, unloading, repair, etc. We walked into a crowded restaurant—all men, all stevedores, longshoremen, and the like, all seated one next to each other at long wooden tables, enjoying lunch, communal style. Towards the back of the main dining room was a primitive fireplace. A roaring fire was blazing away and suspended above it was a huge black cauldron full of bubbling pasta. Sitting next to a huge pile of branches and twigs was a very old lady who fed the fire whenever she woke up. So the men made

room for us (Esther was the only female customer in the place!) and we were served pasta like we never tasted before! How the ancient fire tender managed to cook the pasta - I tell you perfectly! - we'll never know but it was fantastic! Good bread, decent red wine, fresh fruit - what a meal.

Down at the waterfront we watched our car being loaded and lashed to the deck and then we went to see our cabin, which was not bad - bunks, a dresser – a small space but adequate. We stopped in Naples for a day and I remember it being very crowded with narrow twisting streets and laundry hanging between the old crumbling buildings. I also recall walking through a magnificent old building ("Galeria"?) that was a combination of offices and shops, a multi level gem of a building. I wonder if it still exists, or has the neighborhood been bulldozed and replaced with nameless faceless projects??

There were about twelve Americans, including us, who booked passage on Yugolina for the voyage home. We made two more stops that I remember before we hit the Atlantic. One was in Tangiers and the other Gilbralter (the Rock!) but I have faint memories of both.

The crew was courteous, food was solid and stolid, and the voyage unremarkable except for the doctor, a curvy, attractive medic, who we went out of our way to come up with imaginary ills so that we could sit in her tiny office and let our eyes wander over her great body. Remember Smilin' Jack's sweetheart Tess? That was Doc!

So we docked in Newark, NJ on a freezing, sleet ing winter day and shortly found out that the big Mercedes, owned by one of the passengers who was from New Orleans, had a cracked engine block! We had been told by the crew in Genoa to

leave only one or two gallons in the tank in order to prevent freezing. Now this was the era of the "French Connection" and our car was literally stripped; seats out, tires off, pored over; looking for drugs. The process took about two hours and then we were on our way to Brooklyn. But on the Pulaski highway, the poor car ran out of gas. Somehow, we managed to limp home, eager to see Andy and unpack and get settled.

Chapter 10

“You Can’t Go Home Again”

So we entered downstairs, and the first thing we saw in the front room was a motorcycle standing in a pool of oil! This was just the first of many eye-openers that made life hell for us for a few years. It was very rough going for Mom and me and necessitated many visits to a psychologist. Because of Andy’s problems – with school, drugs, the law, our marriage was faltering and as far as Andy and me were concerned, there was no relationship. I had given up on him, but Esther continued to believe in him. Andy did what he wanted and it mattered not what we thought was best for him. We pushed and shoved each other when we insisted he stay home at nights but Andy always went his way. I wanted Andy out of the house-period. Esther however insisted that we should

keep trying to get Andy straightened out. One afternoon, Esther and I took a walk at the Japanese garden at the botanical garden near us and it suddenly dawned on me that I had done everything I could to get Andy straightened out. There was nothing left. I had tried everything and nothing worked. So we settled into a grudging day to day existence, acknowledging each other with brief, very brief, statements. Andy got a job as a bicycle messenger, which was the beginning of a turn around for him. He then bought a small truck and started a moving company. The years passed. Andy got married, formed a rock group that had a gig at CBGB!, and eventually moved with Linda to Florida, and then again to Atlanta, where he has been living for a number of years. He is a great guy, thoughtful, decent, great sense of humor- has even called me "dad" for a number of years. What caused the change? Hard to pinpoint any one thing. Maybe the passage of time has a mellowing

affect on all of us. Whatever the reason, we're happy he's our son!

In the meantime, Lauri had split up with her first husband and was working and living on the upper Westside. I regret that I didn't spend more time, or get closer to, Lauri. The fact that I was working back to back jobs, plus going to school three nights a week, does not seem to me to be a legitimate excuse. Looking back, I am often nagged with thoughts of not talking or reaching out to Lauri, missed opportunities to get to know her better and form a closer relationship. Her formative years sort of developed without much input or guidance, or outward signs of affection from me. Later, our relationship matured. Mom and I took great pride in her running triumphs, her exceptional skills in the kitchen that led to a successful business, of her doggedness in attaining an advanced degree, and all the while raising and nurturing two wonderful

kids, plus keeping a husband happy and well-fed.

Lauri has the rare ability to "take everything in stride". I have never seen her throw up her hands in despair, bitch about adverse circumstances, or badmouth anybody! Lauri takes life's offerings, absorbs them and then gives them back with her own seasonings and flavors without so much as a shrug! What a woman!!

Chapter 11

The Lonely Years

We had taken a ride to a little shopping enclave in Connecticut; a small art gallery, a potter, the usual shops. When we returned to the car, Mom stood on the grass and just stood there. Her eyes were vacant, her face expressionless, her voice mute. She did not respond to my questions, but simply stood still, looking but not seeing. The moment passed quickly, but for an instant, Esther was in another world. This was the first sign that something was going on in Esther's head that was out of the ordinary. Months, maybe years passed, without a reoccurrence. In the 70's our friends the Strassbergs and Mom and I opened a charcuterie on Atlantic Ave. Things went well, and we put aside enough money to enable the four of us to take a week's vacation in England. When we

returned to our shop (Atlantic Crossing) I began to notice that Esther was having difficulty making change or using the scale correctly. It took forever for her to come up with a price for half a pound of cheese. Subsequent visits to many neurologists and specialists revealed that Esther had a brain tumor (wow!). Thus began many visits to many doctors and hospitals for advice. The consensus was to have the tumor removed. The first operation removed most, but not all, of the tumor. A second operation was performed months later but the tumor was too close to the optic nerve to remove it entirely. By this time, Esther could no longer function productively in the shop and the burden of cooking, ordering, cleaning, etc. fell upon Ann and me. I was a full time teacher then, rushing over to the shop at 3:00pm to begin cooking, baking, and waiting on customers. It just wasn't working and we were forced to close. Now here's the conundrum. Is Esther's present loss of memory

due to Alzheimer's? Or is it a result of the operations? The neurologist could not give me a definitive opinion simply because he did not have the answer. Now Esther spends three days a week at a geriatric center where simple group activities are offered. She does not object to this. At home, she constantly repeats sequences of numbers out loud and needs things repeated over and over again. A dozen times a day, she will say to me "I love you" something that was a rarity during most of our marriage. But at other times, she accuses me of thinking she's crazy, says she hates me, and calls me mean. Based on what I've heard at support group meetings this behavior is typical of Alzheimer's patients. Until Lauri and John moved in upstairs, I had no one to talk to. I mean, no meaningful conversation about current events, books, art, movies, etc. There was, and still is, no feedback, opinions, or questions from Esther about anything. Now, I look forward each morning to

greeting Lauri and John, and then again in late afternoon seeing Lauri and hearing about her adventures at school. We've cut back on our music concerts but I am trying to go by myself. We still enjoy dance performances at Joyce, and eat out once or twice a week. I enjoy shopping for food and know how to use sharp knives, skillets, etc, and also know how to prepare and present a pretty decent meal. And, I'm very good at using leftovers. I never thought I'd reach it, but I might yet hit my 85th birthday come summer. We will also, hopefully, celebrate our 60th anniversary and I wonder what that will be like. We look forward to the summer when all of us will be together at Topsail; fishing, eating, drinking- enjoying each other in the sun, on the beach, in the waves, and life at its most enjoyable and wondrous moments.

Yeah!

Chapter 12

Life After Teaching

Around this time, I became more and more involved with environmental groups and their agenda. For quite a long period after I retired, I worked for Cornell Cooperative Extension and developed a marine education and fishing program for their 4H Club members. The program was an immediate success. This was followed with a Master Angler training course for volunteers, and this too, was immensely popular. Finally, folks from Battery Park City Parks Conservancy heard about my program and offered me a job there doing the same thing. That program was started about 23 years ago and now hosts about 800 school kids a year who catch, and release, a ton of fish! I hope my advocacy for sustainable fisheries and the protection of our marine resources has

filtered down to some of the hundreds of youth I have come in contact with.

Chapter 13

Fishing and Its Pull

I must have been about 8 or 9 years old when, on a dark and chilly morning, at the ungodly hour of 5am, my dad shook me and said "Billy, get dressed, we're going fishing". This was the moment I'd been waiting for and I've never gotten dressed so quickly since then. My dad kept his simple fishing gear in a small bag and stored it at the bottom of a hall closet. The bag contained a large spool of tarred, heavy fishing line, some hooks and sinkers, and that was it. Whenever I opened the closet door the smell of that tarred line pulled at my senses like nothing else. On many summer days during school vacation I would get out the spool of line, tie a sinker to the end, and sit on the windowsill in the kitchen. The window and screen went up, and before me was an empty yard,

my ocean. I tossed the sinker out as far as I could and waited, imagining all sorts of wonderful and exciting scenarios. I think I did manage to pull in a broken branch one lucky day. But back to my first real fishing trip. Dad and I arrived in Sheepshead Bay, and all along Emmons Avenue were the fishing boats, and they seemed to stretch forever. Sadly, today there are just a few boats left. A few of the boats were ex-subchasers from WWI and we either boarded the "Glory" or the "Elmar". These were long wooden boats powered by huge engines below decks. The speed of the boat was controlled by the engineer who, in turn, received signals (via bells) from the captain above. Every now and then, the engineer would pop up from down below, his face and bare upper torso covered with sweat and oil, breathe in some fresh ocean air, and then duck down into the stifling engine room waiting for the bells to ring again. From then on, I was totally involved with fishing. Stepping on to a party boat

for a day's fishing was, and still is, an exciting experience. All sorts of things go through my head when I step on board. Will I catch something? Will the guys on either side of me be pleasant? Will the weather turn nasty? Did I bring the right tackle, and so on. And then we leave the dock, sail out into the Atlantic, and finally drop anchor. Our lines go down. The adrenaline kicks in, and we nervously wait for that first bite, that tug of the line that we've been waiting for, and suddenly all is well in the world.

Chapter 14

La Familia

Our small apartment was often the destination of my many aunts and uncles. It was a rare week where I did not see a relative at the house. If one of my uncles was thinking of opening a business, or needed advice on his tax return, he came to the house to speak to Joe, my Dad. My Dad had a keen business sense and could add a column of figures in the blink of an eye! And the apartment always seemed to be filled with wonderful odors of freshly baked cakes and cookies. Lee, my Mom, was one serious baker!

So here's the family – mainly struggling through the depression, but always displaying a sense of humor, patiently waiting until they could sing "Happy Days Are Here Again".

Uncles

Uncle Mitch

He was one of two brothers of my Dad. Mitch's first job was working as a billboard sign painter. Later, he became the owner of a business that made ice cream sandwiches and when we were down and out, he often brought us big paper bags full of the wafers used in the sandwiches. Maybe that's where my love for all things chocolate began. Mitch owned his own house on Dahill Rd. and I clearly remember walking there just about every Sunday morning to ask for the help wanted section. Then my Dad & Roz would pore over it, looking for any and all job opportunities. It always upset me on those Sunday mornings, not so much that we couldn't afford the dime or so for the paper, but that I would have to walk up the stairs and ring the bell and face Uncle Mitch. He was very loud and gruff, cursed a lot, and treated his

wife (my aunt Ida) like a servant. The only positive thing about him that I can remember was that he owned a boat. When I asked Mitch to take us out fishing, he said sure, but first we would have to scrape the bottom and paint it! What the hell! We were just out of the army, so we did it and went out to sea with Captain Bligh!

Uncle Al

Al Stoppick was the one uncle in the family who made it. He was married to my Aunt Tillie - know any little girl today named Tillie? - my mom's sister. Al was always in the shoe business and was really successful having owned 2 or 3 shoe factories in Pennsylvania. He was short and stocky and very soft-spoken, but was the penultimate salesman and businessman. I really liked Uncle Al, especially when about 8 of us piled into his huge hearse-like Hudson sedan and drove way out of the city for a picnic at a State Park. The car was so

big that we opened up two folding chairs between the back seat and the front seat. No compacts for Uncle Al!

Uncle Archie

He made me laugh! Archie, as all of Mom's brothers, had a terrific sense of humor and when he and Aunt Lottie, his wife, visited us I knew I was in for a good time. Now these were hard times. I do remember Archie asking Dad for a loan more than once and despite our own straits, Dad lent him a few dollars to see him through the worst of it. Archie worked on and off as a bartender in some Brownsville dives and eventually bough a luncheonette where Lottie did the cooking. It failed after a short run and they tried again at another location but that too failed. While he was trying to sell the little business, Archie called me and asked if I wouldn't stop in now and then to give the

appearance to a prospective buyer that the place was doing well. I did have lunch there a couple of times, but I think I was the only one sitting at the counter. Archie, like all of my Mom's brothers, died relatively young.

Uncle Sam

A quiet, reserved man, kind and gentle, who took life's hard knocks with dignity and a "roll with the punches" attitude. It was much later that I learned (whispers, half finished sentences, furtive looks) that Sam, after not seeing him for months at family gatherings, was at a Federal facility in Lexington, KY being treated (cold turkey?) for drug dependence. He too was a bartender in Brownsville and eventually steered my Dad to a waiter's job in a gin mill.

Uncle Benny

He was a smooth talking, handsome piano player who played and sang at cafes, bars, hotels, and was in the “entertainment field.” Benny was low keyed and kind to my Mom, and I really liked him. He accompanied Mae West (“Come up and see me some time”) in an act on Broadway (so I was told) and so had a star quality to him. He had a long gig in a Florida hotel one year (I think I was 13 or 14) and Benny invited my Mom and me to stay with him. I remember nothing about that visit except that when we left, Uncle Benny gave me a guitar as a gift! I never learned to play it, but it impressed the hell out of me at the time, as well as the kids in Bensonhurst.

Uncle Moe

You never saw Moe in anything but a well-cut, pressed suit, shirt and tie, and shined shoes. Well, that's what one wore if you were middle

management for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Moe and his wife, Aunt Bea, didn't have to worry or scrimp and save during the 30's and 40's like the rest of us. Moe always seemed a bit cold and aloof and yet did not flaunt his success. He and Bea even visited us in "the Tents" and this was the only time I saw Moe without his suit and tie!

Uncle Harry

Harry never seemed to be stamped from the same press as my other uncles. He always appeared to me as above the fray, confident with nary a worry (during the depression!), urbane and yet concerned with the family. He and his wife, Aunt Sadie, always lived in the best neighborhoods, always in the best apartment houses and their apartments were luxurious—great rugs, sofas you sunk into, and all the little extras that were missing from the rest of our homes. The picture I have in my mind of Harry never changes. He is in his apartment

wearing a smoking jacket, dark grey flannel with piping, and holding a long, expensive cigar, and smiling.

The Aunts

Aunt Tillie

Aunt Tillie, Mom's sister, (married to Al) was the aunt I saw the most of. She was a short lady with tremendous breastworks (a shelf!) whose closest confidant was my Mom. Tillie could not buy a dress, a chair, a pair of shoes without taking my Mom along to get her opinion. In the summer, Aunt Tillie went to Sharon Springs for the restorative waters for a couple of weeks. She and Al started out in Brownsville, then onto a two family house on Avenue N and finally a big, lovely apartment in a new apartment house in Manhattan Beach.

It was about that time that Aunt Tillie had a stroke. She could not speak and I doubt that she recognized any of us. She had around the clock care but finally succumbed.

Aunt Bea

Not only was Aunt Bea's hair plastered down with something like varnish—a veritable helmet—but her very clothes were hard stuff so that when she visited us and I ran to hug her, her dress and coat squeaked! Yet underneath, Aunt Bea was a warm and caring person. When my Dad came home from Memorial Hospital (ridden with cancer) and during a visit could not contain himself, it was Aunt Bea who rolled up her sleeves and with my Mom, cleaned up the mess.

Aunt Ida

Aunt Ida (Mitch's wife) was very close to my mother. They often had coffee together in the morning and chatted about everything. Ida gave as

good as she got with Mitch and possessed a sharp wit with tongue to match. She died rather suddenly at a fairly young age (40-50?) and somehow I think it was from a brain tumor. That left Uncle Mitch a sought after widower and the family soon peppered Mitch with the names of available ladies that they knew. He was described to the ladies as "a diamond in the rough." Well wouldn't you know it, he made contact with a veddy proper dowager and they got married! It was like mixing oil & water—they never blended and it ended.

Aunt Lottie

Uncle Archie's wife was a zaftig housefrau, always with a sunny outlook, and a quick wit. She was the Mom of Ruthie (an early love of mine) and Billy, who for some unknown reason, wound up with my wonderful set of (full size) Lionel trains. Billy was about 6 or 7 years younger than me, and I think

that as I entered adolescence and lost interest in trains, plus the fact that Archie and Lottie were financially worse off than us, we presented Billy with my trains! But the image of Lottie that clearly remains to this day is this. One pleasant summer afternoon, Mom and I visited Aunt Lottie on President Street. I was about six or seven years old and cousin Billy was just a few months old. While Mom & Lottie were chatting in the kitchen, with Billy in Aunt Lottie's ample lap, Lottie casually flipped out one enormous pink breast, which Billy promptly latched onto. I watched in awe, until Aunt Lottie, slightly flustered after she realized she had a rapt audience, closed her dress, and the act was over.

Aunt Sadie

Now here was a piece of work! Sadie's family was at the opposite end of the pole of the Finks & the Trotskeys (Mom's maiden name). Sadie's family

were "The Bersons", a professional class of lawyers, civil servants, judges, teachers, etc. I don't know how, where, or when Uncle Harry (a Trotsky) met and married Aunt Sadie, but he did. Aunt Sadie spoke with a decidedly cultivated and precise diction that somehow bordered on upper class "English Society" - really! As I previously mentioned, they always had beautiful, sumptuous apartments in the finest, and most exclusive Brooklyn neighborhoods. Where did Sadie pick up the affected speech pattern that impressed the hell out of me? That's always remained a mystery...

Aunt Mary

Mary was the chain smoking wife of Uncle Sam and was the main breadwinner in the house. She worked in Mays Department Store in the refund/exchange department. She was tough as nails when it came to giving a refund to a customer and I think she was proud of the fact that the

majority of customers seeking refunds walked away empty handed, thoroughly cowed by Aunt Mary and her steel manner.

Chapter 15

Finale

So there's my family, i.e., as much as I can recall. This account is probably not much different from the history of most families, but I'm stuck with this one, and I love it.

The past 85 years have been an uneven mix of extreme highs as well as some devastating lows, but all in all, I cannot complain. My immediate family provides me with stimulus and interesting sidebars. I read quite a bit and discuss books with friends at a book club and try to play tennis when I can find a partner (singles, anyone?). Esther and I eat out once or twice a week trying new restaurants frequently and are fierce critics of most of them.

Our grandkids, James and Beth, are very special people who lead interesting lives, are self-sufficient, and provide us with yet other perspectives of daily life and current events.

So we take each day as it comes, try to find as many happy moments as we can, and eagerly or nervously await the beginning of each new day.

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