

GERALD SORIN



THE NURTURING NEIGHBORHOOD

*The Brownsville Boys Club and
Jewish Community in Urban America, 1940-1990*

THE NURTURING NEIGHBORHOOD

The American Social Experience Series

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*For my brother
David Harold Sorin
1947-1972*

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THE NURTURING NEIGHBORHOOD

Prologue

For the past twenty years and more, former members of the Brownsville Boys Club (1940–55) have been holding reunions in the Catskill Mountains of New York every fall. Each time, several hundred men and their wives come together to socialize and to talk about the “old neighborhood,” a depression-impoverished Jewish section of east Brooklyn, six miles from lower Manhattan. Relatively successful by many of the measures we use in American society, these men continue to feel a deep need to share, and share again, the memories of their childhood and teenage years, and to tell and retell the stories of 1940s Brownsville: two-hand touch with rolled up newspapers, stickball with Mrs. Rosen’s broomhandle, pick-up basketball games in Nanny Goat Park, scrap-metal collections to help the “boys” in World War II Europe, penny candy, Rabbi Miller’s stick for discipline, kick-the-can, stoopball, the phone calls at Leibowitz’s drug store, the card games on milk boxes, and the endless talk about politics and sports and girls.

Second-generation Jews who grew up in working-class immigrant families near the end of the depression, and “got out,” these men attribute much of their success to Brownsville and to each other. For together as young boys they developed a sense of identity and a powerful interdependence in their games, in the parks, and on their street corners, and they participated in building, on their own, an extraordinary mutual-aid society and authentic community in microcosm called the Brownsville Boys Club. Amazed still at what they accomplished many count the experience as “the single most memorable and important ‘event’ ” of their lives.

Four hundred of these “boys,” now men, mostly between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five, still belong to an active Brownsville Boys Club Alumni Association. At reunions, breakfasts, and frequent social gatherings, in large groups and small, the alumni talk among themselves about the club, long and often.¹ They are approaching the fiftieth anniversary of the BBC in 1990, as well as retirement, dispersement, and thoughts about their own mortality. They want others to hear their story now. They have persuaded me, a younger former Brownsville boy, to tell it. It is an intriguing and instructive tale.

Organized in March of 1940, the Brownsville Boys Club grew out of an informal association of teenage boys who had been closed out of an afternoon recreation center at Public School 184. One of the few recreational facilities directly accessible to boys in the heart of the heavily populated, densely Jewish, Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville, P.S. 184 had two small gymnasiums and an even smaller playground. Street-corner clubs and teams of teenagers often used these limited facilities in athletic competition—when they were not beating up on each other with fists and sticks and an occasional curtain rod or baseball bat in defense of “turf.” But the New York City Board of Education in order to increase play space for younger children had denied the use of the after-school center to boys over fourteen. A group of the youngsters, under the remarkably spirited leadership of sixteen-year-old Jacob (“Doc”) Baroff, circulated a petition for the reopening of the center. In a matter of days they had collected over eight hundred names—mainly from boys who were members of street-corner clubs and teams.

The Board of Education virtually ignored the petition. Baroff, George Schmarek, Izzy Lesovoy, Dave Gold, and several others vowed to continue to act collectively to secure recreation space. They formed a temporary council, and all the boys’ clubs, within an area of approximately one hundred square blocks, were invited to join by sending representatives. As many as fifty groups, including clubs like the Chrislotts, the Stonedales and the Newport Indians, names derived from the boys’ streets and street corners, responded, and the informal association grew, over a period of weeks, from about one hundred to seven hundred members. With these impressive numbers behind them, the leaders, now a slightly larger group, including Joe (“Yussie”) Feld-

man, Norman ("Webster") Goroff, and Jack ("YD") Deutch (*Y* for Yankel), negotiated with schools and other agencies for space. They were successful in securing a regular meeting place in a story-hour room of the Brownsville Children's Branch Library, and ultimately they succeeded in reopening P.S. 184 for their basketball "tournaments."

At this point, given the fulfillment of its stated objective, the loosely organized confederation of clubs ought to have disbanded. But the process of successful collective action engendered enough neighborhood spirit to form the basis of a more permanent organization. Many of the boys had seen that, in making the larger group effort, a relatively long period of peace had ensued between clubs. They came to see, too, that the youth of Brownsville was underprivileged in terms of recreational opportunities, and they committed themselves to maintaining the confederation and using its strength for their own benefit. They successfully negotiated with other institutions for space for athletic events, equipment, and eventually for tickets to ballgames and shows, and vacations in camps. The Brownsville Boys Club continued to grow, attracting organizations of boys and "independents," and even taking under its auspices several street gangs (i.e., clubs somewhat more aggressive in defending or extending turf, and more often involved in violence and vandalism), thereby further reducing some of the destructive interaction in the neighborhood.

One of the many remarkable things about these Jewish teenagers,² who responded vigorously and imaginatively to the crisis of inadequate recreational facilities in Brownsville, is that for six or seven years, and at their own insistence, the boys did it all without adult supervision: without parents, without teachers, and without professionals. Self-government was an important key to the club's appeal. Reformers in cities all over the United States since the late 1880s had attempted to provide play space for street kids. They often had difficulty raising the necessary funds. Even when they were successful in building playgrounds and clubhouses, however, they had the additional problem of "controlling" their wards in those spaces. Teenagers often rejected pre-established adult rules. They did so in 1890 and in 1945; they did so in Chicago, Illinois, and in Worcester, Massachusetts. They did so also in Brownsville; and it is useful to look closely at the Brownsville

case to see what empowerment and responsibility meant to boys in at least one troubled neighborhood.

After the Second World War, the club, still operating with no home space other than the small room in the children's library, and still servicing hundreds of boys, with hundreds more clamoring to participate, attracted the attention of various social agencies and civic leaders. The boys active in the leadership of the club, between 1946 and 1953, faced with the need for larger facilities and more services, accepted, with mixed feelings and mixed consequences the help of professional social workers and adult fund-raisers. Abe Stark, a leading Brownsville clothing merchant, philanthropist, community activist, and Democratic politician gave the club much of his time and effort and he inspired a number of generous donors, including the Charles Hayden Foundation, to help procure first a storefront, and then a permanent home for the Brownsville Boys Club. By October 1953, \$1,250,000 had been spent to build and open an impressive clubhouse on Linden Boulevard.

Less than a year later, to the disappointment of many, the building had been turned over to New York City, most of its activities to be run by the Department of Parks. This part of the story and the general history of the building will be told in the later chapters of the book. Taken together those chapters can serve as a case study of what may happen when an authentic mutual-aid society is affected by the narrow concerns of traditional electoral politics, or when it becomes part of a large, complex bureaucratic structure. But the building, particularly after it was turned over to the City, was not the Brownsville Boys Club. The boys—"Yussie" and "Weasel", "Yankel" and "Doc", "Sheiky" and "Hooker", "Whitey" and "Red", "Chink" and "Izzy"—and their culture of Jewish Brownsville, were the Brownsville Boys Club.

The club emerged in the context of economic depression, urban blight, social service deficiencies and what at least looked like a rising tide of juvenile delinquency.³ My goal in this social history is to understand the communal and individual vitality that allowed the achievement of the club, and to explain the relative absence of serious criminality and social pathology among the boys who were part of the process of club formation and development.

An analysis of class and economic experience is necessary and criti-

cal here, but there is no escaping cultural factors in the explanation. Ethnic culture, once a “neglected dimension of American history,” has become over the last two decades a very useful category of historical analysis. Scholarship prior to the 1950s, particularly the work of Robert Park, Louis Wirth, and a number of other sociologists, confidently assumed that mobility and assimilation were inevitable for ethnic groups in the United States. Within a generation or two the cultures of the immigrants and their children were expected to yield to a “homogenized human brew.”⁴ Our own experience since the 1950s, and the watershed work of sociologist Milton Gordon, and social historians like Rudolph J. Vecoli and Deborah Dash Moore have made us recognize and reexamine the continuing vitality of ethnicity in modern American society.⁵

By the 1970s many historians were arguing that we must “study the distinctive character of each ethnic group” and neither overemphasize the power of the new environments nor underestimate the “toughness of cultural heritage.”⁶ Most recently John Bodnar produced what is probably the best synthesis available on the American urban experience of immigrants and their descendants. He has persuasively demonstrated that the “content” of “immigrant mentalities,” was as much cultural as it was class-based. The newcomers acted as workers, i.e., as members of a class, but they and their children in the new American context “also remained tied to selected ethnic symbols, . . . institutions,” and values. These cultural attachments tended to dilute strictly class concerns.⁷

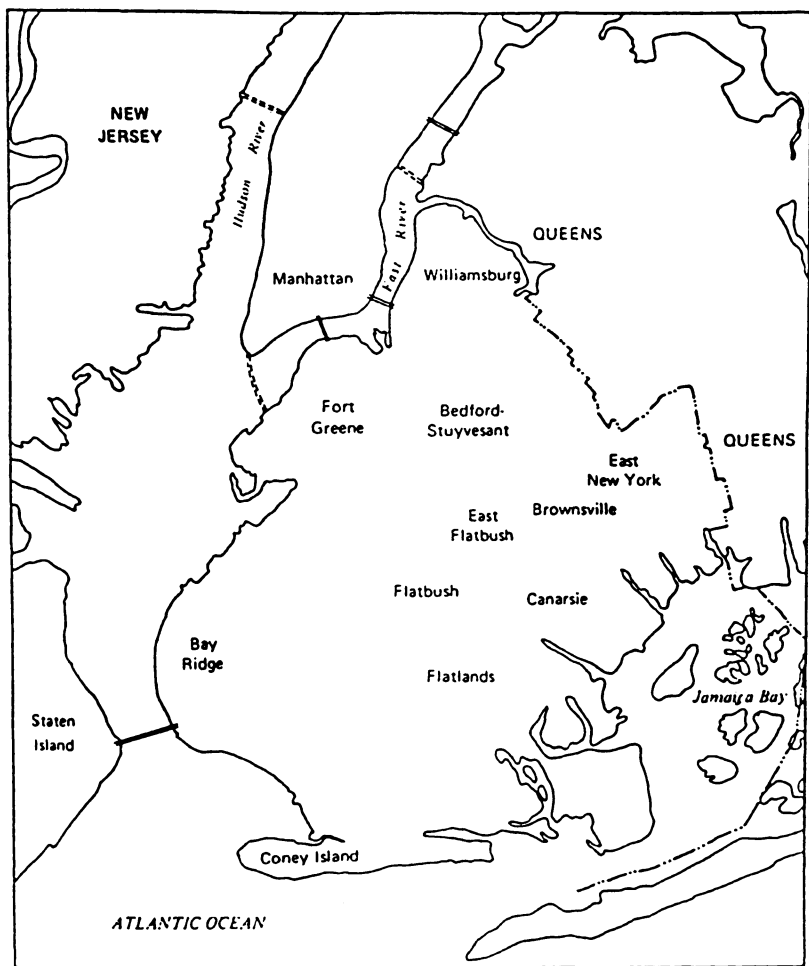
Jews were very much part of this process of interaction between class and culture, and between the whole self and the American environment. The religious *culture* of the Jewish immigrants as much as their “nonpeasant” *class* experience helps account for the relatively rapid social mobility of their children in this country, and for much of the story of the BBC. Disproportionate numbers of Jewish immigrants did bring with them a more complex economic history and more commercial and industrial experience than that brought by many other groups. But they also brought with them a deeply embedded religious culture, a long-standing commitment to community, and a centuries-old tradition of mutual-aid.

The persistence of this culture in America would be neither total

nor linear. Interactions with changing conditions and economic realities in the old countries, but particularly in the new one, produced distinct adjustments which redefined, but did not dissolve the ethnic and religious dimensions of Jewish culture. The adjustments, for many, included reformulated ethical injunctions, remodeled self-help institutions and a progressive politics—in short, an *American* Jewish identity. It was out of this new context, tied to capitalism and urbanization, but simultaneously tied to Jewish tradition, household and community, that the children of Jewish immigrants built the Brownsville Boys Club.

Class experience mattered much. But so did ethnic culture count in shaping attitudes and behavior. It is difficult to determine precisely the relative influence of class and ethnicity on values and achievement; it is also difficult, often, to *separate* class culture from ethnic culture.⁸ In any case, in the 1930s and 1940s, non-Jewish white ethnic neighborhoods, relatively similar in socioeconomic status to Brownsville, do not appear to have produced institutions like the BBC. Nor did black Brownsville in the 1960s and 1970s.

The “boys” of the BBC live now in twelve states from Vermont to California, and from Michigan to Texas. But the vast majority reside in the greater New York area, and many are still in Brooklyn (30 percent), though none in Brownsville—at least not physically. Ninety of these men, representing the general geographical distribution of the alumni, have graciously allowed me to interview them, and I have had questionnaires answered and returned by more than 160 others. While looking at their lives in the context of questions about ethnic identity, urban change, and physical and social mobility, I will at points throughout the book allow the men themselves to speak. Their memories are sharp and their feelings run deep. Their perceptions and insights taught me much, including the fact that Thomas Wolfe was wrong on at least two counts: it is not true that “only the dead know Brooklyn”; and in some important ways you *can* “go home again.”



Brooklyn neighborhoods. Brownsville, in the left center portion of the map, is approximately six miles from lower Manhattan. (Adapted by author from Harold X. Connolly, A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn [New York: New York University Press, 1977.])

CHAPTER I

Brooklyn's "Lower East Side" : Brownsville Before the Boys Club

"Where ya from?"

"Brooklyn."

"Uhhuh. What section?"

"What section?"

"Yea. 'At's what I said. . . . So what section of Brooklyn d'ya come from?"

"Ahh, whaddya boddring me for? It ain't exactly a section. . . ."

"What section?"

"Well it's kinda near East New York."

"Ahh, stop stallin', willya, what street?"

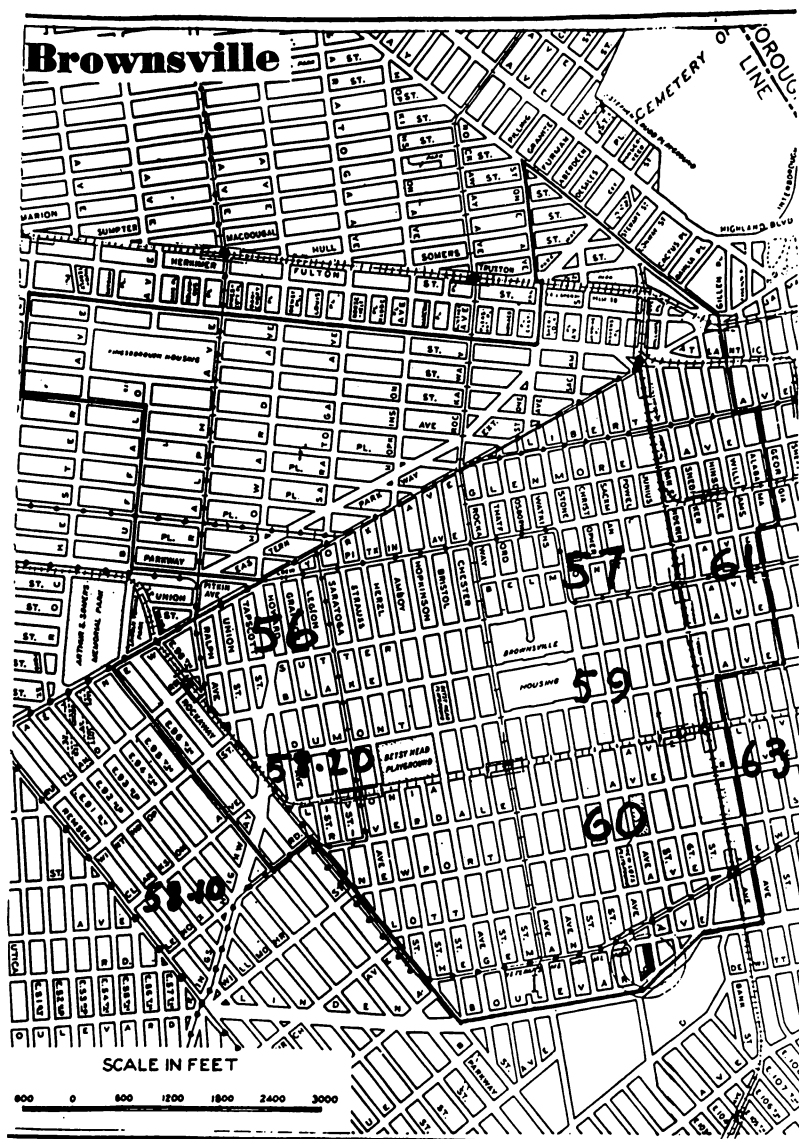
And as you let the answer trickle slowly forth, you would involuntarily brace yourself—

"Ahah! Dat's in Brownsville, hah hah, Brahnsvil. Noo? howz Peetken Avenue?"¹

—WILLIAM POSTER,

" 'T WAS A DARK NIGHT IN BROWNSVILLE"

By the time the Boys Club was born near the end of the depression in March 1940, many Jewish residents of Brownsville, a crowded, impoverished neighborhood in east Brooklyn, were preparing to leave or were, at least, dreaming of leaving for "greener pastures." But only sixty years earlier, in the 1880s, Brown's Village was itself surrounded by farms. In 1885 a moderately successful tailor from New York, Jacob Cohen, thinking the fresh country air of Brown's Village would



Brownsville streets, with Health Areas marked. (Courtesy of Brownsville Boys Club Alumni Association, adapted by author.)



Shopping was done all along Belmont Avenue in small stores and in the open market. Here, where the avenue met Osborne Street, one could buy fresh produce, kosher meat and chicken, shoes, candy, nuts, cake, a shirt, and perhaps a bottle of rye whiskey or schnapps. (Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection.)

be good for his ailing wife, bought a house there. Not long afterward, other Jews from New York's congested Lower East Side followed. Speculators from Manhattan soon bought land from the Brooklyn farmers, subdivided it and began promoting the glories of the new suburb. Some of the land was purchased by New York clothing manufacturers, wholesale garment merchants, and contractors, who, in the hope of producing goods at lower cost, established "outside" shops in Brownsville. The possibility of jobs as well as the promise of less crowded conditions, further stimulated migration and by the end of the nineteenth century, a sizeable town, pronounced *Brabnzvil* or *Brunzvil* by its Yiddish speaking inhabitants, had taken shape.²