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Origins and Early Jobs: A Bronx Autobiography

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ORIGINS AND EARLY JOBS

Introduction

"The Pulley," the first article based on the memoirs of my father, Carl Halpern, began with his securing a job as an errand boy at the age of 14 in 1917 at Electro Chemical Engraving Corporation (then known as the Hauserman Metal Manufacturing Company). Thus began almost a half century of his association with the firm. He retired as Vice-President in 1964. My father's memoirs reflect the optimism of a child of Jewish immigrant parents. Some of the hopes for a new beginning in The Bronx were fulfilled in the achievements of his career and in his meeting the needs of family and kin. Electro, like many firms of its time, had a policy of employing relatives of the existing workforce. As noted, Electro was also known as "The Place," and provided support for family life. It was not only the focus of work lives but also a setting for social contacts. Many employees met their eventual spouses there. Obviously, the kin networks among employees made for a more cohesive workforce with lower turnover. It also clearly made for a workforce less inclined toward unionization until the late 1940s. But there was also a balancing sense of concern for employees on the part of management, evident particularly during the Great Depression. This sense of managerial concern—some would call it paternalism—is absent in most contemporary corporations. Elements of a family model were common in the way many businesses were organized at that time.



Abraham and Sadie Halpern (grandparents of Joel Halpern) with their four sons c. 1915.

Joel Halpern's father, Carl, is second from left.

Courtesy of the author.

For me to work with my father in reconstructing his life and, by extension, my own past, has been a challenging journey. Even though my father lived in a society where records were kept, the magnitude and administrative anonymity of a big city have made the search for supporting documents on family and factory enterprise a hard one. As an anthropologist whose major work has been in the Balkans, Southeast Asia and the Arctic, I have spent most of my professional life over four decades writing about Serbian peasants, the royal court in Laos, and Inuit (Eskimo) settlements. These are people with known pasts whose local roots go deep and whose history lies all about them in coherent memories, surviving material remains, and in some archival documents. Our family has none of that. Reconstructing the history of immigrants to The Bronx is a difficult undertaking. While I know the names of the towns from which each of my paternal grandparents came to America in the mid-1890's, neither my father nor his next eldest brother Jack, knows the name of either paternal or maternal grandfather. My father's memory is excellent and his memoirs on personal life and work in The Bronx total thousands of pages, but this essential information is missing. This information was obviously known to his parents, and certainly to his mother's mother, who came to America. But the point is that family history, except for some fragments related below, was not discussed.

In a precursor to the Holocaust, all of my paternal grandfather's kin who had remained in Galicia were killed in a pogrom by Cossacks at the beginning of World War I. Some years ago, while an Associate at the Russian Research Center at Harvard University, I recall finding in the stacks at Weidner Library an account of massacres of Jews in Eastern Europe during World War I. While leafing through the yellowed pages, I wondered whether any of the corpses pictured in the photographs might have been my great-grandparents. As my father's account makes clear, the Old Country was never discussed in any detail in his home. His parents purposely avoided talking of the past, at least in front of their children, and focused on their life in The Bronx. It is interesting to note that similar attitudes have been found on the part of survivors of the Holocaust in a later generation. Related experiences have also been noted in Armenian-American families where parents came from a similar background of violent death and did not wish to share with their children the horrors they had directly experienced or known about.

One heritage that was brought from the Old World was my paternal grandmother's anti-clerical feelings. My father, as the eldest of four brothers, had a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, but this observance was not repeated for his brothers. It is, of course, possible that, had there been a strong religious tradition and some ancestor of noted accomplishment, there might then have been more elements of a European-based family history. This lack of articulated historical tradition outside of America is a reason I have selected as one of the illustrations for this article a surviving family photo with the background of a boat

and an American flag, representative of the new life. Together with citizenship papers, that photo and a wedding picture and subsequent family portraits are the heirlooms which lend symbolic legitimization to beginnings in The Bronx. In this case they pertain to Jews who, as a people, share a proud and long history.

Carl Halpern's Account*

In our home there was hardly any discussion about the journey from Europe and the experience at Ellis Island. It seems odd, but I can't remember any talk about Europe. My father's family history is very tragic, and I do not know as much about it as I know of my mother's side. I am ashamed to say that I do not know the names of my paternal grandparents and of their daughter, my aunt. They lived in Tarnopol. It was then Austro-Hungarian Galicia. My grandfather was a shopkeeper who sold kerosene. In the conditions that then existed, he did well. I used to ask my father about life in Europe but he would never answer because of the tragedy of the Cossack pogrom during World War I [about 1915] when his father, mother, and sister were killed.

Of my father's migration to America, I recall only that he came about 1898 to join his older brother, Sam. I think a reason for my scanty recollections is that I never heard my mother or father say anything good about where they came from, even apart from the tragedy. My parents met here and they married in 1900. I was born in 1902. Among the few family documents to survive are my father's citizenship papers from 1921, taken out at the time that we lived at 3816 Third Avenue in The Bronx. My father also had an uncle whom we children called Uncle Rappaport. He was very nice but it was he who brought my father the news of the murder of his family. Since we were children, I was never clear about the exact relationship. He must have died when we were young, since I don't remember seeing him after we began to grow up.

This brother Sam was my father's only relative in America. He was a carpenter. He was not very religious himself, but he made a living making coffins for Orthodox Jews. He bought old crates and boxes which had been used to ship dishes and other items from Europe. Then he used the wood to make the coffins. Sam left his wife and two children in Europe and, according to the story, planned to bring them over once he established himself in America. However, he decided to divorce his wife by means of a *get*, which was a paper signed by a rabbi dissolving the marriage. [This was a procedure frequently used by Jewish immigrants. The divorce process was depicted in the film, *Hester Street*.]

* Comments by Joel Halpern are enclosed in brackets [].

My parents were very upset, especially my mother. She refused to have anything to do with Sam, even though he was my father's only close relative in America. When the woman he planned to marry came to our house to introduce herself, my mother ordered her out. My mother never relented, and refused to see her or my father's brother, so there was no relationship of any kind between our family and his American family. After their mother's death, the children from his European marriage came to America. We never became close and lost contact with them. So my father's family was out of our life.

My mother was born in Lemberg [now Lvov in the western U.S.S.R.]. The story is that her father was a tax collector and died after falling off his horse. Her paternal grandfather was a notary but I know nothing else. [Her family, which had a history of government service, and was therefore somewhat assimilated, bequeathed to her a scepticism about aspects of formal religion, as differentiated from cultural heritage, which my father shares.] My maternal grandmother, Mary, lived in a non-observant household and I was told, and I feel, her very name was a break with Jewish tradition.

After my mother's father's death, Mary came to America with four of her children. These were my mother Sadie, her sisters Martha and Fanny, and the youngest brother Benny. They came to join two older brothers, Meyer and Isaac, about 1898. At first they settled on the Lower East Side. I believe my parents met here, but they may have known each other in the Old Country. Meyer was the oldest brother. He was a furrier by trade. Later he moved to Newark. Shortly after my mother's arrival, he married a woman he had known in Europe and whose family had come to America earlier. He had a heart condition and died soon afterward, and gradually we lost touch with his family. I do remember, though, that he had three daughters and a son whom we did visit for a time.

Isaac also married and had two daughters. His wife's family longed to be reunited with relatives who had settled in England. Within a few years, they all moved there and we never saw them again. In the beginning, they did write and we learned that they had settled in Manchester. Gradually the correspondence ceased, but a cousin of mine who was a soldier in England during World War II did visit them.

Fanny was my mother's older sister. She had been married and divorced in Europe before coming to America. She resided with my grandmother Mary, and her sister and brother, Martha and Benny. Soon Martha met a man from Lemberg named David and within two years they married. Eventually Benny met a woman named Bessie from the same area and they also married. Benny had learned the trade of ironworker. After his marriage, he and Bessie continued to live near my

grandmother and Fanny on the East Side. Benny and Bessie had four children! Shirley, Celia, Marty, and Nat. Some years later, after they had moved to The Bronx near where we lived, and after I had been employed by Electro for some years, I was able to find jobs in the company for my uncles Benny and Dave. I also found positions there for Dave's son-in-law and for two of Benny's children, Marty and Celia. This left my aunt Fanny alone with my grandmother Mary, but by this time they had moved to an apartment in our building. We all lived in the Tremont section of The Bronx within walking distance of The Place.

Aunt Fanny went to night school and learned to read English. She was a waitress at Childs. As her English improved, she was able to get a better job at Childs. Aunt Fanny was ambitious. She was not interested in finding another husband after her bad first marriage. I especially remember her introducing me to reading *The New York Times*, which she always strongly endorsed over "the Hearst papers". Many years later, I met the man she had divorced in Europe. He was anxious to remarry her and she refused. I remember how proud I was of her. Here she was, educated, working, speaking English; and here he was, a greenhorn, stupid and, in general, just repulsive. He had developed a very flourishing livery business where he rented out horses and wagons. I remember visiting one of the stables in The Bronx. He lived there, and it was so filthy we would not eat there.

My parents moved to The Bronx in 1907. We stayed at the first place on Third Avenue until 1916, and I remember we then lived at 1530 Webster Avenue. It was from Webster Avenue that I went to work at Electro. Even though we had the Third Avenue El plus streetcars nearby, we felt as if we were in the country. The buildings were much newer than on the Lower East Side. Our Webster Avenue apartment was just across from Claremont Park and a short distance from Crotona Park, where there was a lake for boating. About six blocks away were vegetable and dairy farms where we bought fresh produce, milk, cheese, and eggs. When I think of the time, something over a half century ago, when this was a quiet place with farmland and parks, it's hard to realize that this area of my youth would become synonymous with the problems of urban crowding, conflict, and what some would call disaster.

As I mentioned, Aunt Fanny and my grandmother took an apartment in the same building but, unfortunately, Aunt Fanny died of cancer not long afterwards. My grandmother Mary moved in with Uncle Benny and his family nearby. She died during the flu epidemic at the end of the First World War. We were now all together in The Bronx, but life was a constant struggle. Well into the 1920s and 1930s, it was difficult. I remember how hard it was for my father to find steady work. He had jobs as a carpenter, glazier, and general contractor. At times he

even worked as a waiter. Of course, we were not alone in our struggle. We had the same problems as other Jewish, Irish and Italian families in the area where we lived. My father learned how to install window-shades in private homes. Since the windowshade was at that time something new and decorative, eventually he was able to build up a little business of his own. He remained in the shade business until the end of his life. When he died in 1952, he was living in a four-family house at 1157 Colgate Avenue. My parents lived on one floor and two of my brothers and their families lived in two of the other apartments. In the basement, my father had a workroom where he made shades. So you can see that my family's involvement with The Bronx spanned some six decades and three generations.

While we were on Webster Avenue, my father would go off to measure people's windows and, depending on the color and style, he would then have the shades cut to size and sewn in the City. When I was about twelve, he used to take the Third Avenue El into the City to pick up the shades. While there, he would buy rollers and slats from a supplier. Then he would assemble the shades on our kitchen table and go install them for his customers.

My three younger brothers and I were born about two years apart. It required considerable income in those days to care for a family, especially with four hungry boys. My mother was very able and careful about what she bought. I remember especially that we often had potatoes. To this day I don't care for potatoes. But my mother always managed to prepare food that four boys would enjoy and that would help them grow up healthy. My mother was something special, not only as cook, baker, housekeeper, mother and wife, but as a person. I always had tremendous respect for her. She was outstanding. She used to get together with the Jewish, Irish and Italian women in the neighborhood. The women felt that their primary job was to be housewives and to take care of their husbands and children. A woman who worked outside the home while raising a family had, they felt, an undesirable situation and they helped her out. Her children would go to friends' houses for sandwiches and milk. None of the women had much money, but they found ways to assist each other without any formal organization. I remember those days when, of course, there was no bottled milk. I used to be sent to the grocery store with a container, and milk was ladled out of a big can.

Most of the housewives' actions resulted from conversations outside the home, either talking on the street or sitting on the front stoop. The women of the neighborhood also got together while shopping or when buying from one of the local peddlers who circulated through our neighborhood all the time. The Jewish and Italian women (there were

few Irish in the neighborhood) shopped at the same stores, except for the meat, which the Jewish women bought at Kosher butcher shops. When there was some tragedy, like a death in the family, they visited in each other's homes. In those days, relatively young people died of diseases which are now easily cured. If a child died, the other women would go sit with the bereaved mother and drink tea. This visiting among the women also took place when a husband lost his job. This was something terrible, like an illness or a death. At such a time, a family really needed the help of relatives, friends and neighbors to tide it over. Of course, there were no unemployment or welfare benefits such as we take for granted today. Another kind of tragedy was the death of a man in an accident on the job. Neighbors were really important then.

At home we spoke a mixture of Yiddish and English, but mainly English. My father read the Yiddish paper, *The Forward*. My Uncle Benny said that *The Forward* [which had a socialist orientation] was for radicals, so he read *The Morning Journal* which was also a Yiddish paper. Our Italian neighbors mostly used their own language. But, somehow, we managed to understand each other and we learned each others' sayings. I remember a Mrs. Giesi, an Italian woman on our block. She was very friendly and she learned some Yiddish proverbs. She was the wife of the super in the house next door. They had three sons who followed their father in the plumbing trade. The women brought samples of their very different baking and cooking to share with each other. My mother really liked this sharing. Who then had money for store-bought cake? We children really benefited from this friendliness. Since they shared mostly baked goods, I don't remember Kosher observances being a factor.

My mother did not hesitate to discipline her four sons. If one of my brothers used improper language, she would wash his mouth with Kirkman's soap. We boys would not do anything we thought my mother would object to, at least not within her sight. We were normal and mischievous but very respectful of our mother. My brother Jack did have a way of getting into trouble. Our mother felt responsible for steering him on the right path. The local policeman, who was well known in the community, caught Jack and his friend Barney stealing pickling jars off someone's fire escape where they were stored. They used to sell them in the next neighborhood. The policeman came up to our apartment and reported to my mother what her son had done. He asked her permission to use his belt on Jack. My mother readily agreed, and he whipped Jack right there in front of her. But the policeman never had to come to our apartment again.

At that time, living conditions were very different from what my own children and grandchildren have experienced. When we first lived in

parents, grandmother and brothers accompanied me to the synagogue for the services. It was customary to throw rice on the Bar Mitzvah boy when he stepped outside the synagogue after the service. But I got something special. My brother Jack mixed pebbles in with his rice to throw at me. Knowing Jack, I can't say that it came as a total surprise. My Bar Mitzvah was the first and last for the brothers. Jack used to hide under our bed to avoid going to *cheder* and once he put vinegar in a glass of water for a visiting rabbi who was recruiting for the school. Actually he would have gone to the *cheder* had my mother insisted, but she had not been brought up to be religious and her brother-in-law's religious divorce still angered her. But, fifty-odd years later, Jack was proud to learn the appropriate prayers at the time of the Bar Mitzvah of his grandson. As parents, my brothers have turned out to be observant in this respect, and so have their grandchildren.

When I applied for my first passport when planning a trip abroad, I had to do something unusual. I had to write to P.S. 4 at 1701 Fulton Avenue for a copy of my school record. This was necessary since I had to have proof of birth and my actual birth certificate records me under my Hebrew name, Kalman, and lists me as female! It was really interesting to look over that school record, listing my attendance at various schools including P.S. #2, 4, 42, and 55 during the period 1908 to 1915. We didn't move around so much. I recall only the two addresses mentioned earlier. The situation was that P.S. 2 and 4 were old schools which closed down during my years of attendance, and 42 and then 55, from where I graduated after one term, were new schools. I remember that the principal of P.S. 4 was Mr. Hirdansky, and Mr. McCarthy was the principal of 42 and then became the first principal of 55.

Actually, during the short time that I went to P.S. 55, it was only partially completed. The principal somehow found out that I had some carpentry skills, and I became a sort of junior repairman going from room to room to do what was necessary. Although I was able to do this in addition to my school work, my homeroom teacher objected to losing control over one of his pupils, but he could not buck the principal. I remember the teacher as a mean individual, and I still recall his name. Years later my wife, Nettie Halpern, was an elementary school teacher in The Bronx and worked under this same man when he became a principal. My nephews, Lowell Halpern, son of my youngest brother Irving, who lived with his parents on Decatur Avenue and subsequently became a teacher of physical education in The Bronx school system, remembers passing this school on his way to work when he taught nearby.

In addition to helping my father, I held other jobs while in seventh and eighth grades. This was also about the time that I got my working

The Bronx there were no bathrooms, that is, no special room to get washed in. My mother used to make us boys bathe in the big metal tub she used for washing clothes. My mother insisted that we be clean, and when she made up her mind about something, it was done. The four of us slept in one bed. My father stood over us as we were settling in and he would hit whoever caused a fight or who did not seem ready to settle down and go to sleep. Really, the thought comes to me, how did we do it? How did we manage? We had no choice.

I remember that when I was about ten, which would be in 1912, I began to go with my father to help him carry the shades after they were all assembled with rollers, slats, and sometimes tassels on the cords. It helped that I was tall for my age. Later, I learned to measure window dimensions and take a color chart along to help the buyer select the tint desired. There wasn't much choice—it was white, ivory, cream or black. Eventually I started to help my father out by taking the El into the City to do the pickups for him.

When I was eleven, my parents decided that I would go the *cheder*, the Jewish religious school, after regular school hours. The initiative came from my father, who wanted me to prepare for my Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen. Interestingly, my grandmother Mary was one of the women who had joined with other Jewish ladies in the community to support the local *cheder*. It was located in an old synagogue. The rabbi who was responsible for preparing the boys for Bar Mitzvah knew very little English, so he spoke to us in Yiddish, which we all understood.

For myself, as I look back on it, this was a pretty busy life for an eleven-year-old. In addition to regular attendance at elementary school, I now went to *cheder* after school and also went to the City for shades and supplies. In the evening I did my homework. Every Saturday morning, my grandmother Mary took me to the synagogue. She dressed in black satin. It was a social occasion. She greeted friends we met as we walked there. After depositing me at the ground level section, for males only, she went upstairs to the balcony reserved for women. It was my grandmother who took me, since my father, not being an observant Jew, worked on Saturday, and my mother did not wish to go. My father did, however, observe the most important Jewish holidays.

We usually left early in the morning, without breakfast. It was my understanding that this was the appropriate thing to do. I was really hungry but there was nothing I could do about it. During the services, the men would check to see if the young boys were praying at the appropriate passage in the *sidur* [prayerbook]. After a while I developed a system to make a cover for my prayerbook from leftover shade material. On the inside of this cover I wrote the time and page so that I was always in the right place. Finally, the day of my Bar Mitzvah arrived. My

papers. I feel sure that many young people of that era found themselves in the conditions I describe and many made much of their lives. In my case, I had a special desire to help my parents with the little that I earned. True, I drove myself because that was my nature. I was always anxious to learn and find out things that could be useful to me later on. My jobs were always a way of learning for me. This was necessary for one of my type who lacked money, education and the necessary background. An early job after school and on Saturdays, when I wasn't going to the synagogue, was to help the peddler Baruch, by carrying bags of vegetables or fruit upstairs to customers in the apartment houses. People would call down their orders from the windows and I'd carry them up. Baruch was too poor to pay me in cash, so instead I received bags of fruit and vegetables for my family. I began work at 6 or 7 in the morning and then, after lunch, I worked in the nearby shoe store. Again, I learned how hard one had to work to exist. Nothing worth doing is ever easy, but the pleasure of doing the right thing is the best payment for a person's efforts.

The shoe store was small and operated by Mr. Levin and his wife. They sold high buttoned shoes. They came with the buttons sewn on with cotton thread, but not too securely, to allow for the thickness of the foot. Either Mr. or Mrs. Levin would make a chalk mark where the buttons should be. It was my job to cut the buttons off the thread and reattach them. I did this with a small wire or treadle machine. Of course, shoes sold in the 1914-15 era were not like today's. Another chore I had was to return to their proper places the boxes of shoes that the salesman had taken out to show customers. Since I had not yet obtained my working papers, Mr. Levin had to be careful about the labor inspectors. On Saturdays and after school when I wasn't working for the peddler, who started early in the morning and was finished by noon, I was working in the shoe store. On Sunday morning, I used to go in and clean up the store. This continued until I finished elementary school, when I started looking for a full-time job. Some of my friends went on to high school and I lost contact with them. Years later, I took courses both at Mechanics' Institute and City College in New York in the evening after my work at Electro. I was always so busy working and studying that I really never had much time for the family.

On Sundays, the men would sit outside the apartment house and talk. They rolled their own cigarettes because this was cheaper than buying ready-made ones. They would talk about politics and unions. At this time unions weren't very strong. The Iron Workers' organization was just getting started. Many of the men worked in the garment trade and so were conscious of the beginning work of the ILGWU. I passed them on my way to the shoe store to clean up.

My first encounter in getting a full-time position came after graduation from elementary school. On a Sunday, I saw an ad in *The New York Times* that called for a young man to start as a stock clerk in an Andrew Geller store on Madison Avenue and Seventy Second Street in the City. This store had a reputation for quality merchandise and they catered to women who could afford to pay the price. When I went to see the manager, I told him that I had had prior experience and I gave him the name of Mr. Levin, who had meanwhile moved from The Bronx to Erie, Pa. He wrote for the reference, and I was hired. I remained at this job a number of months and tried to learn all I could, but the cost of traveling and of having to buy my lunch was not desirable. My next job was at Blumstein's Department Store on Third Avenue between 149th and 150th Streets in a busy area of The Bronx. I was able to walk to work, since it was only about a mile from home, and I also brought my lunch, saving both the carfare and lunch money. I was hired in the shoe department.

After I worked there for a few months, I saw a bulletin board notice stating that there was an opportunity in the accounting department. Since I was not anxious to remain in the shoe department, I thought that maybe accounting work would be more interesting and I could learn more about the business. Also, the chief clerk told me that I would have the opportunity to work overtime. I applied and was transferred to accounting. At first I liked this work very much and I stayed there for quite a while gaining experience that was useful to me. My next move came when I noticed an ad for an accounting clerk with experience wanted by the clothing store of Rogers Peet at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. I applied and was accepted. The pay was a little higher, about four dollars a week. I was also able to bring my lunch and they served coffee, tea and milk. This was a saving and now I could learn more about record-keeping, accounts receivable, and inventory control. Working for such a well-ordered organization was a plus. Perhaps I would follow this work in the future.

But, again, I was young and restless and I now felt that accounting work was not for me. The father of one of the young men I knew was a foreman in a machine shop. They had received an order for making starters for the Model T Ford. My friend told me that he was joining his father at the shop and that he could get me a job there. I would be taught to use machines, do casting work, grind, and learn a lot about other operations. About fifty people were employed at this Bronx shop. The toolmakers interested me. They were skillful machine operators. They set up some of the required work for others. I operated a simple drill press that had been set up for me. But I also had the chance, in spare moments, to see the other kinds of work performed. I brought my lunch

as did most of the other workers, but I still had to pay the carfare which was then a nickel on the streetcar line.

This machine shop employed a draftsman to prepare layouts and instructions for the toolmakers. I became friendly with this man who was German. I asked questions which he answered. I learned the procedure for making tracing cloths from the original black-and-white layouts so that blueprints could then be made from the tracing cloth. This procedure involved using a ruling-pen and dividers and applying India ink. In this way, the information copied was sharp and clear, and the tracing cloth could be saved and used again when necessary. It was most interesting, so I spent as much time as I could save from my lunch period learning. I even went to the library to read whatever information I could get and understand. (I used to go to the library on McKinley Square at 168th Street and also to the Tremont and Fordham branches. I never read novels. I then liked the biographies of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington, in addition to technical books.) I was so glad to do the various kinds of work that helped my learning. The foreman seemed very pleased with me and told me that he had noticed that I spent part of my lunch period with the draftsman. The latter had told him that I was a young man who asked many questions. Since my name was Carl, the draftsman thought I was also German.

Once the draftsman was sick, and the foreman needed certain blueprints. Since only the pencil layout had been made, they needed them traced on cloth. He asked me if I wanted to do the job. I told him that I would try my best. This was a challenge and the foreman seemed pleased with the result. When he asked me to take the tracing to the blueprint office, I literally flew there. The results were good and the toolmakers also approved. The owner observed my interest and jokingly remarked that it seemed to him that I was interested in going into this business, but he told me to keep up the questioning. When the draftsman returned, I went back to my other work, which this time was assembling the Ford starters. When the contract for starters was finished, I felt that it was only a matter of time until some people would be laid off and this, of course, would include me. I then started to look at the want ads again, but this time I was anxious to learn about manufacturing. It was important to leave of my own accord rather than be laid off. This I had done in my previous job. Now I had my working papers available from the previous jobs.

An advertisement in *The Times* appealed to me. This called for a young man willing to work very hard for advancement. The name of the advertiser [Hauserman Metal Manufacturing Company, predecessor of Electro] and address were familiar to me. I had passed this area every day on my way to the Blumstein Department store. In

addition, I could walk to work and possibly bring my lunch, saving both carfare and lunch money. I read the advertisement a number of times and decided to apply for the position. At the same time, I tried to answer many of the questions that came to my mind. The factory was in a large building at 1100 Brook Avenue located in the midst of a residential section. Its size indicated that it must employ many people. But what could this company manufacture? It was a Sunday and I decided to walk over and observe more carefully. The building had a large sign, but the name itself did not help me find out which product or products were made there. I also walked around to see what other plants were located in the area. The factory occupied the block between Brook Avenue and Webster at 166th Street. At this point it entered into Webster Avenue which ran parallel to Brook. It was a nine-story building of cream-colored brick. The front had a loading platform at the northern part. On the southern edge there was a staircase for factory and office workers as well as a visitors' entrance. The back of the building faced Park Avenue and the New York Central Railroad tracks. To the south was a three-story structure used as a stable, and a one-story iron works. On the other side was a red brick building which housed a rug company. The other notable plant was that of Sheffield Farms Milk Company on Webster, with the big milk bottle on top. There were also stores, a lunchroom and a moving-picture house on the northeast corner. [The application for this job and the first months of experience are described in "The Pulley."]

The memories of Jack and Carl supplement each other. As the oldest brother, Carl was concerned with earning a living. Although Jack, too, went to work after finishing elementary school, his parents expected less of him in terms of work obligations. He had more time to play and to be around the house and to participate in life in the neighborhood. Clearly, their differing dispositions also were crucial. Carl's serious manner as oldest son was related to the weight of responsibilities he was expected to, and willingly did, assume. Jack's playful disposition and his loving attitude toward his father are clearly linked to his status as a younger son. Carl's affectionate memories of his mother and his empathy with her responsibilities very much relate to the burdens he carried as a young boy, even while in elementary school. In some ways Carl's account is similar to the behavior reported of children in today's struggling single-parent families where young adolescents are concerned about paying the utility bills and the rent. This is not the place to develop in-depth psychological profiles of my father and uncle, but merely to suggest the variability in the windows of the mind through which we glimpse the past. The two accounts can be read in parallel. Where appropriate, I have put Carl's comments on Jack's recollections in parentheses.

It is also important to emphasize that while relationships among the different ethnic groups could be positive, as in Carl's memories of his mother

cooperating with other women, there was also conflict. There were gang fights relating to ethnic and religious friction, and the epithets used reflected distrust and fear. "Kike" (Jew), "Wop" (Italian), "Polak" (Polish) and "Mick" (Irish) were familiar to all. "Niggers" (Blacks) lived in distant neighborhoods and so were not encountered on a day-to-day basis. The Jews' use of the term "goy" to refer to non-Jews was also a reflection of these felt distinctions.

Jack's Account*

I was born in 1904. My father came from Tarnapol and my mother from Lemberg. They lived in Austria where Franz Jozef [the Austro-Hungarian Emperor whose long reign began in the 19th century and ended with the First World War] had been good to the Jews. The whole bunch migrated to England and then came here and settled on the Lower East Side. (I understood that my parents came here directly. I was quite sure about this but Jack had the time to spend with the family to learn these things. I was either working or reading.) My mother and the rest of her family didn't like England, and they came here and settled on the Lower East Side on Suffolk Street. I was a little kid but remember my father having appendicitis. We lived on the top floor, and he had to be carried to the ambulance, which was a horse and wagon. I remember clearly his being carried down all those stairs in a chair. When I was six, in 1910, we moved to The Bronx from East Third Street in Manhattan to 3816 Third Avenue in The Bronx. All our relatives also moved to The Bronx and settled near us at Claremont Parkway and 173rd Street. Later we moved to 1530 Webster, which I remember was right on the corner across from Claremont Park. At about the time that Carl was working in the shoe store, I had a job delivering meat before going to school. Shortly after this, Pop was found to have a bad case of TB and he was sent away to Liberty in the [Catskill] Mountains to recuperate. I was then twelve, and this was about the time that Carl started working at Electro. (Now I remember him going there and staying for about a year and a half.) I remember going to visit Pop in Liberty. (I don't, but it is possible.) When Pop came back he first took up some easy work and was the super for our building where he collected the rents and did some of the maintenance, sharing the work with another employee. The owner's name was Goldstein. He used to like to come to our apartment to eat my mother's good food and to talk. (When Mr. Goldstein came in, I went out. I didn't care for his manner.) In addition to our apartment house, he had other properties where Pop did glazing and carpentry.

At the time of the First World War Pop got a job working on the construction of barracks for soldiers in Port Jervis [New York]. Trucks came

* Joel Halpern's comments are bracketed []; Carl Halpern's interpolations are in parentheses ().

to our area and would load up ten to fifteen men at a time. Then men would work there during the week and come home on weekends. My father wasn't lazy. (I know he tried in every way to earn a dollar and maybe sometimes he got discouraged. He was a sewing machine operator on men's shirts as well as a carpenter and a waiter. Some of these skills he had learned in Europe as a child.)

I had a wonderful childhood. I really enjoyed myself. My friends and I had a helluva good time. My favorite friend was Barney, whose nickname was "Barney the tramp." His parents were Irish. His mother was friendly with my mother. We had four or five in our clique and we weren't a bad bunch. We didn't harm anyone. We didn't molest old people—we had respect. I remember that Jewish families used to put jars of pickles mixed with onions and garlic on the fire escape. We used to go up there in the evenings and take the jars. On the corner was a bakery called the Straight Edge. In the evening, they put out loaves of bread to cool off. Once we took a few loaves and the pickles and had ourselves a feast across the way in Crotona Park. I also remember that for the next couple of days we were sick with cramps.

Across the street from the bakery was the Bronx Church House on Fulton Avenue. It was something like the YMCA and, later it was taken over by the YMHA as more Jewish families moved to the neighborhood. They had bowling. I used to be a pin boy and set them up for the men to play. I think I was paid \$1.50 a night.

Another thing we used to do, like Peck's bad boys, was to go into the cellars of the apartment houses where the tenants stored some belongings. We then switched them around. Folks really got crazy when they found out what had happened.

We had cousins from Brooklyn, the Lerner's. They would come on Sundays for dinner. We, however, were never invited to their home for a meal. They liked my mother's excellent cooking. One Sunday, my mother sent me out for some herring. Instead of buying the herring I picked up a dead rat in the alley and wrapped it in an old Yiddish newspaper. Then I brought the package home and put it on the table. My mother got out the plates and forks and brought salad. My mother and Mrs. Lerner prepared for everyone to have a meal. There were ten people. There were six of us and four of them. They had a son and a daughter. Everyone sat around the table and then Mrs. Lerner opened the newspaper and, lo and behold, there was the rat. After that they all made a dash for the door and we never saw them at our house again. Pop was laughing so, he was very glad not to see those spongers again.

There were a couple of the early chain grocery stores in our neighborhood. On the corner of 172nd Street and Third Avenue was Daniel Reeves and nearby was James Butler. There were also a few movie

houses such as Benison and Blenheim. The Blenheim was on 171st Street and Third Avenue. The price of admission wasn't much. It was two adults for five cents. But my friend Barney "the Tramp" (he later moved to Newark) and I never paid. We climbed over the iron spiked fence and got in through the window to the toilet and then went in and took our seats. In the same building there was a liquor store. When I wanted to make a few cents, I went around collecting old demijohns and brought them in, two or three at a time, and got a nickel for each. The owner was a German Jew I didn't particularly like. He would ask me, "Jankel," he called me by my Yiddish name—"Where do you get the bottles?" I told him that I picked them up in the garbage. He then put them down in the cellar. The following day, I would go down there and take a few and come back and resell them to him.

There was another movie house, Fox's Crotona, on Tremont Avenue. At that time, they had one picture and several vaudeville acts. We used to go in there and eat bananas and other fruit. What we couldn't finish, we would throw down into the orchestra. After we did that a few times, we were caught and kicked out and so couldn't go there anymore. Later, my younger brother, Nat, got a job as an usher there. (I remember, it was in the middle of the block. It was comfortable and quiet and carefully patrolled so that there was no unnecessary noise or excitement, but I never remember my parents going there.)

On Bathgate Avenue there were lots of pushcarts. While we never deliberately stole, some of the owners were mean to us. These pushcarts were held up by a stick. I remember we would sometimes kick the stick out and, as the vegetables began to spill, we would grab some. We took them to a cave we had made in the park, and there we used to roast potatoes, which we called "mickeys." Sometimes we had cucumbers too. Since the father of one of my friends owned a vegetable store, I suppose we could have gotten the potatoes from him but it was more fun to do it the other way. I also remember that when my Uncle Benny and Aunt Bessie were having a hard time, they rented a wagon and went selling vegetables between Bathgate and Third Avenues. Later, they had a fruit stand.

There was a music store on Third Avenue called Cooper's and a pharmacy on the corner run by a man called Lotz. He was there a long time. When we left the neighborhood he still had his store there. Opposite our house was the Public National Bank. This was the only one nearby that I remember. But there was a saloon on every corner. My parents used to give me twenty or twenty-five cents and a two-or-three quart aluminum pail. I'd take it down to the saloon and they'd fill it up with beer and also give me a pile of pretzels and cheese. Then we'd all have beer together at home. (I do remember drunks on the street, but they

weren't our neighbors and I doubt that they lived in the area. I was so used to seeing them that I paid no attention.)

In the back of the house, I had a garden where I raised corn, radishes, potatoes, and tomatoes. My youngest brother, Irving, was helping me, when a nasty kid from the neighborhood threw a brick down on him and cut his head. I was real angry, and, the following day, when this kid was working in his garden I went up on the roof and threw a few bricks down on him. I also hit him. I now realize I could have killed him, just as he could have killed my brother. But we didn't think of that then. This garden was actually on a lower roof, and I remember bringing up the pails of water, since we had no hose. (I remember that my mother had a vegetable garden in the back of the house.)

A less harmful way of throwing things was when we had musicians come by on Sunday afternoons. They used to play the violin and sing classical music and people would throw down packets of pennies. During the weekdays it was peddlers crying out, "Old clothes for sale" or "I cash clothes." If we had old clothing, we would give it to him and he'd give us a quarter or half-dollar.

One winter day, I went "ice skating" in Bronx Park with my friends Phil and Barney. We, of course, didn't have regular ice skates, so we just used our shoes on the ice. At the end of the pond was a waterfall. Well, we just slid over the waterfall and into the Bronx River. We were at Bronx Park East and didn't have any money to get home to Claremont Parkway, so we had to walk. Naturally, I came down with double pneumonia. Dr. Richmond came by and told Mama to get *malinas*. That was Yiddish for raspberries, as I remember. She got it at the drug store and made a brew. He told her that I was very sick and just to pray that I would pull through. My mother took me to the barber shop where they put *beinkas* on my chest and back. There were six or eight of them. They put a little alcohol in those small glass jars and put them on the skin. The resulting suction was to help with the circulation of the blood. This treatment was thought to be ideal for a bad cold. [This procedure known as cupping has continued to be used by physicians in some European countries up to recent times.] It was all over in a few days, and my high fever was gone, and I again went over to the Bronx Church House to set up the pins.

But we were good kids. If we told Mama and Pop that we would be home at a certain time, then we would be back then. We had the biggest respect for our parents. (I can just see my mother now saying to Jack, "Better you cry than I cry," and she would smack the guts out of Jack. But we were a close family.) Whatever Carl said or did was for the benefit of all the brothers. Carl may have been a bookworm, but he was also a brainy person. (Nothing came easy to me, especially thinking. My

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mother had a lot to do with my brothers showing respect toward me and making me look better than I was.) It's kind of interesting, but there were never any fights between the brothers.

Once, I remember that there was an old lady who got off the El at the wrong station. But she had no money and had lost her way. She was from the Lower East Side and was going to visit her daughter. So I walked her to her daughter's apartment, which was about ten blocks away. When I left her she said, "God bless you," in Yiddish. (At home we spoke both Yiddish and English.) But I got home late. Pop said, "You're not getting any supper." I explained to him what had happened but he told me that I was lying. But I told him that what I had said was the God's honest truth. But I was sent to bed without supper, although later Mama came in with some food for me. I was the only one in the family that Pop always had the strap off for. (My mother taught us more without the strap than he with the strap.)

But there was work, too. I used to go down with Carl to the Lower East Side to get material for the shades. (If we went down there on a Sunday, the kids in the neighborhood where we went would call us dirty Jews, since we were the only ones working. Later I helped Jack get his working papers when he was fourteen. He had to go to work.)

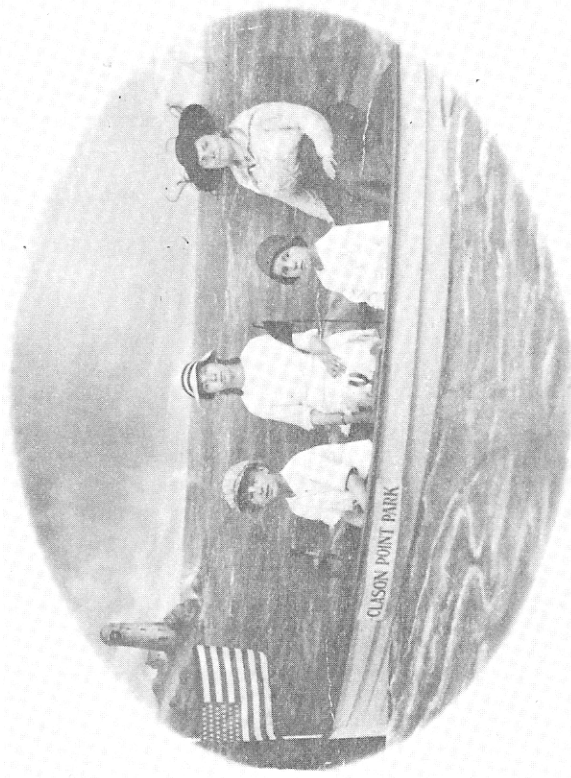
Our family went down to Second Avenue to the Yiddish theater where we would see Molly Picon, Boris Tamashevsky and Jenny Goldstein. My mother liked Jenny and if she had a good cry, she was happy. I remember Tamashevsky in King Lear. We went every Saturday night. This theater was on the Bowery. There was only one Yiddish theater in The Bronx, on McKinley Square, but it didn't draw a big crowd. I think we went there only once. There was also a place near the house called Niblo's Garden, where they sometimes had vaudeville shows. (The shoe store was open on Saturday night and I had to work there. I do, however, remember my mother explaining the shows to me. What surprises me is that my parents had enough money to go to the theater.) I also remember the family going for picnics on some Sundays when the weather was nice. When I was older, we also went on hikes, mostly in the Bronx Park area. People didn't own much at all but we found lots to do.

A few years later, Carl got me a job at Electro. I worked there one day but I didn't like it. It was very dirty and it wasn't for me. To this very day I bring it up to Carl: I didn't get paid. But Carl was very good. He got jobs for many in the family. Jack ran out. He didn't like the smells and he's right; he didn't punch out. Eventually, almost everyone in the family wanted a job in the factory.)

There was a cousin in Harlem who had a store at 97th Street and

Madison. He had a customer who was looking for a young fellow as an apprentice to learn the trade of mechanical dentistry. At that time, I was working for Feldbaum and Spiegel on 38th Street and First Avenue making fur coats. This Mr. Manny contacted me and he hired me at \$14 a week. I was his apprentice and began to learn the trade. It was six days a week and I often had to come in on Sunday for half a day. I did a lot of carving. It was a good life. We had respect for one another and I have continued with this trade till today.

Professor Joel M. Halpern, in memory of his father Carl, has established an annual award for the author of the best article of reminiscence in *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*. We at *The Journal* are deeply grateful.



Family Outing c. 1914.
Left to right: Jack Halpern, cousin Selma,
Irving Halpern, and aunt Fanny.

Courtesy of the author.