

POVERTY IS A TRAP

By MICHAEL GOLD

1. FIFTY CENTS A NIGHT

THE East Side was populated then by pauper Jewish families and by pimps, gamblers and prostitutes. It was the city's red light district: a 606 playground under the management of the great business firm, Tammany Hall. The pious Jews could not understand; so *this* was America. But we children were at ease in the underworld.

Girls sat along our street, fat and skiny, nonchalant on chairs, red shawls over their shoulders. They lazily chewed sunflower seeds, winking and jeering at every male passer-by. Flowery kimonos draped their naked flesh, slippers hung from their feet, they were ready for "business." (Males were known as customers on our street.)

Once in the night I was awakened by shots. I ran to the window; neighbors buzzed like bees at the other windows; the tenement was audience. In the dark backyard there was lightning of orange pistol fire, and fierce male voices. In the morning we children found blood on the stones; gamblers had been fighting.

One election day, at the polling booth in the barber shop, we children saw Tammany Hall blackjack a man, cave his head in, and jump on his face until it was a red sponge. The man shrieked murder, and a policeman turned his back and walked carefully away. We saw many such slug-gings, official and otherwise.

Jake Wolf the saloon keeper was a grand kindly man. Everyone looked up to him, he was an East Side grand duke. He had curled moustaches, a great glittering gold chain, and we admired him as he stood before his saloon mornings, a toothpick in his smiling gold teeth. He was the friend of everyone in trouble, the man my father respected, the man who gave children nickels, the man who was regent on earth of the remote awful mystery, *Tammany Hall*.

From his saloon, men in sporting clothes were bounced forth, scraping the hard pavement with their faces, drunken men, weeping sentimental tears. Once a great tattooed sailor sprawled over the sidewalks and raved of China and the Philippines; he seemed queer to children.

Harry the Pimp bought me my first book of Mother Goose rhymes, though he himself read no English. He was a successful young Jew in the strange land, well adapted and an amusing visitor at our home, where he relieved my father's depression, and treated him to handsome cigars in silver foil.

The sun glowed; the sky was freshly blue; the air was exciting with spring odors, the sap mounted in children. We were mad with spring, as though new life stirred under city stones. On the East Side pushcarts came out in spring, the way Jogwood does in other parts of the world. The pale bearded peddlers rose from the cellars of winter, and shouted in the street like triumphant warriors. Apples and oranges glittered on their carts; there was clothing for sale, gloves and tropical calico; sweet potatoes, herrings and clocks. Spring ushered in a huge ragged fair. And on the roof an Italian gangster was busy at the gangster's sport; he was flying pigeons in headlong, joyous circles across the sky. Singing Irish teamsters passed in blue flannel shirts for the spring. The horse cars blundered by and we stole rides. We were cursed, pushed, crippled, we were under the million feet. We spun tops, we dodged trucks, we stole apples from the pushcart of a patriarch with a white beard, who sat dreaming of the Torah wisdom. We flung dead cats and tin cans into the steamy den of the persecuted and sinister Chinese laundryman; we jeered the shawled prostitutes at their posts; we taunted the policeman; it was Spring.

I recollect the prostitute Rosie; she was a sullen, drab girl, with pimpled face and sad ox-eyes. One spring morning we children ran up and down before Rosie at her post, screaming, "Fifty cents a night! Fifty cents a night!" She bit her lips and pretended not to hear us, but we persisted with the joyful cruelty of children. She fled into the tenement. Then my mother called me from the window. I obeyed reluctantly, and there in my house sat Rosie crying. My mother slapped my face and Rosie begged my mother not to be so angry, and I cried, but my mother was very angry.

This is my first clear memory.

2. FATHER AND MOTHER

My father was a romantic; my mother was a realist. My father had been a Roumanian tobacco smuggler on the Russian border; a young hobo for years along the Danube. He had wandered in Hungary, Turkey, Bessarabia, and had run a flour windmill for his father, and a pottery store. My mother's people had owned a dairy farm in Hungary; she was vibrant and dark, like a gypsy. She had worked since the age of nine, raising a family of orphans. She worked as a servant for rich Jews in America, and had saved pennies and

sent for her family one by one; she worked on like a horse after marriage.

My father met her through a professional Jewish matchmaker; a droll bearded trickster, who had many other startling trades; he was a sexton and real-estate broker, a gravedigger and wine salesman. This man made the match, and got his commission; then I was born, five bawdy houses, saloons and tenements from the wild Bowery. There was a birthday party with cake, herring and brandy for the neighbors.

My father was a housepainter and hated the trade; the lead poisoned his very bones. He would come home at night, vomit into a bucket, and groan. He had once owned a suspender shop with a cousin; the cousin had been shrewd and had cheated him out of the partnership. My father's one vast hate was this man, this scoundrel who had plunged him into misery, who had locked him into the trap of poverty, out of which the ownership of a shop was the golden key.

—That thief, that murderer, my cousin! moaned my father. I will kill him. I will take my shop back!

It was a winter day and my father had been sick for two weeks with the painter's sickness. A knock came at the door, a voice, and my father recognized his cousin's cough.

—Don't let him in, that thief! he shouted weakly. I won't talk to him, I'll kill him!

But the stocky little Jew, stylish and sad, entered timidly and started suddenly to cry.

—Chaim, forgive me! he said, the tears rolling down his fat cheeks. I have gained nothing by cheating you! I am a sick man, the doctor says I haven't long to live if I don't go to the country. God has punished me for taking the shop; it has been a curse to me, not a blessing.

—Go away, you thief! said my father.

—Chaim, listen! said the cousin. Spit on me, curse me, I did you wrong! But please take back the shop! Maybe God will forgive me then!

My father leaped out of bed joyfully and embraced him with new found vigor. My mother put on a kettle of tea, the neighbors came in and there was rejoicing in the tenement. But the shop proved a curse to us, as to my father's cousin. It was not the key out of the trap.

It was in a long damp gloomy basement on Chrystie street; three sewing machines, and a cutting machine. Roar and grind all day, dust flying

and giving us asthma, heads worrying over bad business, monotone like the drip of water in a morgue. My father worked, and my mother worked all day, between cooking meals and tending the baby at the back where we lived. I worked, after school hours, sometimes by candlelight until one in the morning. It was a nightmare of work and worry, and out of it all my father averaged \$12 a week, often less than his workers were earning. But he was a *Boss*. This pleased his romantic soul. The workers smiled affectionately and called him Chaim the *Boss*; they didn't keep books or worry, yet earned as much as he did; it was better to be a worker. But he felt like a *Boss*.

But everyone liked my father; he was a sport; and his "workers" and other friends came many nights and played cards with him, until my mother was disgusted and threw them all out; and then we often went to the Roumanian wine cellars of the East Side.

Moscowitz's cellar was on Rivington street, then, and in the smokefog a hundred Jews in derby hats sat sweating and drinking and chattering as though the world were about to break up. It was an insistent machine-gun rattle of talking, and glasses tinkled, and workers laughed, and Moscovitz played the dulcimer. It was a sweatshop holiday, Egypt's slaves around the campfire, in the shadow of the man-murdering Pyramids. And Moscovitz played the dulcimer. Red peppers dried in festoons on the wall behind him; a jug of good wine was at his elbow; and he beat with little hammers on the sweet dulcimer, Moscovitz the musician.

—Yi, yi, yi, that song! sighed Srul Leichner, a little man with a mild, sad, wasted face, who wore rubber collars, and was nicknamed Pickles, because for years he had worked in a pickle factory on Orchard Street, until the brine ruined his eyes. Do you know what that song is, Mechel?

—No, I said.

—That is better than an American ragtime! he sighed, sentimentally. But you are an American and can't feel it like we feel it, Mechel. That is a song the shepherds sing in Roumania when they are watching the sheep in the fields and playing their flutes. Yi, yi, yi! Those summer days in the fields, Mechel!

They gave me wine to drink. I liked it, and there were nuts, pickles and pretzels to eat. And my father made me get up on a table and recite a poem I had learned in school:



"Hey, Pop! I gottim. He jes' crawled in me shoe!"

Drawing by Otto Soglow

*I love the name of Washington,
I love my country, too,
I love my flag, the dear old flag,
The red, white and blue.*

There were many cheers. Look! he speaks English already! exclaimed Mottke the Blinder, (so-called because of his cross eyes), and I am in this country six years and can't speak a word! It's a wonderful! He will become a doctor at least!

—I want to be a fireman, I protested.

—Tsst, Mechelka! said Wachsmann, the anemic cloak operator, severely, that's a job for Irish bums, not for Jews.

The more wine my father drank the more jokes he could tell, the more wisdom he would impart. Tolstoi was the greatest writer in the world, because he had made the Czar be kind to the Jews. And the Talmud was the greatest book in the world; in the Talmud stood everything.

—It takes the Angel Gabriel six flaps of his wings to come to earth; the Angel Simon it takes four; but the Angel of Death comes with one flap of his wings. So it stands in the

Talmud, said my father.

We were out on the street, we were going home at last. I was a little drunk. The store windows glared; the night was frosty and black over the roofs; the East Side masses paraded. One felt a little sick, as if at the end of a Coney Island day. My father sang and declaimed.

—Your father would have been a great man, Mechel, a rabbi or a doctor, if he had had a chance! cried my father theatrically. No, your father is not a fool, and maybe he will yet show the world, maybe there is yet time!

—Yes, popper.

—But you, my sweet son, will have it different from us. You will have your chance; your mommer and I will work our fingers off to make a somebody out of you!

—Yes, popper.

My poor mother was very angry and scolded us when we came home after a visit to the campfire at Moscowitz's. Women suffer without wine and laughter to help them, and so they grow angry at men.

3. SUMMER TIME

Summer is terrible on the East

Side. The stone tenements are prison walls, and shut out the world's winds. The asphalt bubbles underfoot; you can't breathe for heat. You choke; you grow thin and irritable; you can't sleep at night in the bedrooms; there is everywhere the garbage and sick cats, and flies, bedbugs and roaches in millions. You hate to see so many people forever; they strangle you, they steal your air. The sun is a murderer, he fells men, women and horses in the street; he creates the pitiless flies, and gives them joy, but the weak little Jewish babies he murders. Down the airshaft one heard all night twisting and moaning of restless sleepers, and sad ghosts walked the streets all night, it was too hot to sleep.

On the most impossible nights my mother took bedding and pitched it like a tent on the sidewalk before our tenement. There in the Oriental street I and my sister slept. This is still done on the East Side occasionally, though the Board of Health now frowns on the practice, though not on Poverty itself. I was sleeping thus one humid summer night; it was just before the Fourth of July, and

there was much shooting of revolvers and cannon crackers. I was exhausted by the heat, and slept through the uproar, when suddenly I sprang up with a great scream of fright. Some careless person had thrown a cannon cracker at me and it had exploded at my very face. A big slice of flesh was torn from my left arm; I still bear the scar. And for weeks I would leap up out of my sleep in delirium, with that explosion at my face, and would see planets whirling and meeting in catastrophe, and tremble with fear. I have never forgotten that Fourth of July.

One Sunday we escaped to Bronx Park, it was the only country I ever knew till I was eighteen. We fought our way through the mobs of flustered Yiddisher mommers and poppers in the elevated train; at every station a new mob assailed us; sneezing, crowding, spitting; it was worse than a crowded bedroom. But my mother was happy.

—I will take off my shoes and walk on the grass, said my mother hopefully. I haven't done that for twenty years.