

A GANG OF LITTLE YIDS

(from a Book of East Side Memoirs)

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By MICHAEL GOLD

When I was nine years old, Nigger Goldman was leader of my gang. He is now a Broadway gangster.

I first admired Nigger in school, when I was new there. He banged the teacher on the nose.

School is a jail for children. One's crime is youth, and the jailers punish one for it. I hated school at first; I missed the street. It made me nervous to sit stiffly in a room while New York blazed with autumn.

I was always in hot water. The fat old maid teacher (weight about 250 pounds) with a snuffle, and eyeglasses, and the waddle of a ruptured person, was my enemy.

She was shocked by the dirty word, I, a six year old villain once used. She washed my mouth with yellow lye soap. I submitted. She stood me in the corner for the day to serve as an example of anarchy to a class of fifty scared kids.

Soap eating is nasty. But my parents objected because soap is made of Christian fat, is not kosher. I was being forced into pork-eating, a crime against the Mosaic law. They complained to the Principal.

O irritable, starched old maid teacher, O stupid, proper, unimaginative despot, O cow with no milk or calf or bull, it was torture to you, Ku Kluxer before your time, to teach in a Jewish neighborhood.

I knew no English when handed you. I was a little savage and a lover of the street. I used no toothbrush. I was lousy, maybe. To sit on a bench made me restless, my body hated coffins. But Teacher! O Teacher for little slaves, O ruptured American virgin of fifty-five, you should not have called me "LITTLE KIKE."

Nigger banged you on the nose for that: I should have been as brave. It was Justice.

2. Street Joys

Ku Klux moralizers say the gangster system is not American. They say it was brought here by "low-class" European immigrants. What nonsense. There never were any Jewish gangsters in Europe. The Jews there were a timid bookish lot. The Jews have done no killing since Jerusalem fell. That's why the murder-loving Christians have called us the "peculiar people." But it is America that has taught the sons of tubercular Jewish tailors how to kill.

Nigger was a virile boy, the best pitcher, fighter and craps-shooter in my gang. He was George Washington when our army annihilated the redcoats. He rode the mustangs, and shot the most buffalo among the tenements. He scalped Indians, and was our stern General in war.

Some of the gang have become famous. Al Levy was known to us simply as "Stinker"; now he writes wealthy musical comedies.

Abe Sugarman is a proud movie director. He also has become a Spanish nobleman. His Hollywood name is Arturo De Sagar, no less.

Lew Moses shoots craps with high stakes, with skyscrapers; he is now a big real estate speculator.

Others of the boys are humbler comedians. Jake Gottlieb is a taxi driver, and feeds his three kids every day. Harry Wientraub is a clothing cutter. Some of the boys are dead.

There was always something for boys to see in the free enormous circus of the East Side. Always a funeral, a riot, a quarrel between two fat mommas, or an accident, or wedding. Day after day we explored the streets, we wandered in this remarkable dream of a million Jews.

Our gang played the universal games, tag, prisoner's base, duck on a rock. Like boys in Africa and Peru, we followed the seasons religiously for kites, tops and marbles.

One of the most exciting games was invented by Nigger. It was the stealing game. Nigger ran the fastest, so he would march up to a pushcart and boldly steal a piece of fruit. The outraged peddler chased him, of course, which was the signal for us to grab fruit and run the other way.

With a penny one could buy much; a hot dog, or a cup of cocoa,

or one of thirty varieties of poisoned candies. Watermelon, apples, and old world delicacies like Turkish halvah and lakoom; liver knishes; Russian sunflower seeds; Roumanian pastry; pickled tomatoes. For a nickel, a mixture of five of these street luxuries produced amazing Jewish nightmares in a boy's stomach.

We turned on the fire hydrant in summer, and splashed in the street, shoes, clothes and all. Or went swimming from the docks. Our East River is a sun-spangled open sewer running with oily scum and garbage. It should be underground, like a sewer. It stinks with the many deaths of New York. Often while swimming I had to push dead swollen dogs and vegetables from my face. In our set it was considered humor to slyly paddle ordure at another boy when he was swimming.

What a dirty way of getting clean! But the sun was shining; the tugboats passed, puffing like bulldogs; the freight boats passed, their pale stokers hanging over the rails, looking at us; the river flowed and glittered; the sky was blue; it was all good.

Nigger taught me how to swim. His method was to throw a boy from the steep pier. If the boy swam, well and good. If he sank and screamed for help, Nigger laughed and rescued him.

Jack Korbin died that way, I almost drowned, too.

But it was good. We were naked, free and cocoon with youngness. Anything done in the sun is good. The sun, the jolly old sun who is everyone's Poppa, looked down as affectionately on his little riffraff Yids as he did on his syphilitic millionaires at Palm Beach, I am sure.

3. City of Lava Streets

Let me tell of a trait we boys showed: the hunger for country things.

New York is a devil's dream, the most urbanized city in the world. It is all geometry angles and stone. It is mythical, a city buried by a volcano. No grass is found in this petrified city, no big living trees, no flowers, no bird but the drab little idiot sparrow, no soil, loam, earth; no fresh earth to smell, earth to walk on, to roll on, and love like a woman.

Stone. The ruins of Pompeii, except that seven million animals full of earth-love must dwell in the dead lava streets.

Each week at public school there was an hour called Nature Study. The old maid teacher fetched from a dark closet a collection of banal objects: bird-nests, corn-stalks, minerals, autumn leaves and other poor withered corpses. On these she lectured tediously, and bade us admire Nature.

What an insult. We twisted on our benches, and ached for the outdoors. It was as if a starving bum were offered snapshots of food, and expected to feel grateful. It was like lecturing a cage of young monkeys in the jungle joys.

"Lady, gimme a flower! Gimme a flower! Me, me, me!"

In summer, if a slummer or settlement house lady walked on our streets with flowers in her hand, we attacked her, begging for the flowers. We rioted and yelled, yanked at her skirt, and frightened her to the point of hysteria.

Once Jake Gottlieb and I discovered grass struggling between the sidewalk cracks near the livery stable. We were amazed by this miracle. We guarded this treasure, allowed no one to step on it. Every hour the gang studied "our" grass, to try to catch it growing. It died, of course, after a few days; only children are hardy enough to grow on the East Side.

The Italians raised red and pink geraniums in tomato cans. The Jews would have, too, but hadn't the skill. When an excavation was being dug for a new tenement, the Italians swarmed there with pots, hungry for the new earth. Some of them grew bean vines and morning glories.

America is so rich and fat, because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants.

To understand this, you should have seen at twilight, after the day's work, one of our pick and shovel wops: watering his can of beloved flowers. Brown peasant, son of thirty generations of peas-

ants, in a s^h undershirt by a tenement window. Feeling the lost poetry. Uprooted! Betrayed!

A white butterfly once blundered into our street. We chased it, and Joey Cohen caught it under his cap. But when he lifted the cap, the butterfly was dead. Joey felt bad about this.

4. *Little Cop Fighter*

To come back to Nigger.

He was built for power like a tugboat, squat and solid. His eyes, even then, had the contemptuous glare of the criminal and genius. His nose had been squashed at birth, and with his black hair and murky face, made inevitable the East Side nickname: "Nigger."

He was bold, tameless, untouchable, like a little gypsy. He was always in motion, planning mischief. He was suspicious like a cat, quick to sidestep every sudden kick from the enemy world. The East Side breeds this wariness. East Side prize fighters have always been on the lightning type; they learn to move fast dodging cops and street cars.

The East Side, for children, was a world plunged in eternal war. It was suicide to walk into the next block. Each block was a separate nation, and when a strange boy appeared, the patriots swarmed.

"What streeter?" was demanded, furiously.

"Chrystie Street," was the trembling reply.

BANG! This was the signal for a mass assault on the unlucky foreigner, with sticks, stones, fists and feet. The beating was cruel and bloody as that of grownups, no mercy was shown. I have had three holes in my head, and many black eyes and puffed lips from our street wars. We did it to others, they did it to us. It was patriotism, though what difference there was between one East Side block and another is now hard to see. Each was the same theosophist's fantasy of tenements, demons, old hats, Jews, push-carts, angels, urine smells, shadows, featherbeds and bananas. The same gray lava streets.

One had to join a gang in self-protection, and be loyal. And one had to be brave. Even I was brave, an odd child cursed with the famous Jewish introspection.

Joey Cohen, a dreamy boy with spectacles, was brave. Stinker claimed to be brave, and Jake Gottlieb was brave, and Abie, Izzy, Fat, Al Levy, Maxie, Pishtoppel, Harry, all were indubitably brave. We often boasted about our remarkable bravery to each other. But Nigger was the bravest of the brave, the chieftain of our brave savage tribe.

Nigger would fight boys twice his age, he would fight men and cops. He put his head down and tore in with flying arms, face bloody, eyes puffed, lips curled back from the teeth, a snarling iron machine, an animal bred for centuries to fighting, yet his father was a meek sick little tailor.

Nigger began to hate cops at an early age. The cops on our street were no worse than most cops, and no better. They loafed around the saloon backdoors, guzzling free beer. They were intimate with the prostitutes, and with all the thieves, cokefiends, pimps and gamblers of the neighborhood. They took graft everywhere, even from the humblest shoelace peddler.

Everyone knew what cops were like. Why, then did they adopt such an attitude of stern virtue toward small boys? It was as if we were the biggest criminals of the region. They broke up our baseball games, confiscated our bats. They beat us for splashing under the fire hydrant. They cursed us, growled and chased us for any reason. They hated to see us having fun.

We were absorbed in a crap game one day. Suddenly Fat yelled: "Cheese it, the cop!" Everyone scattered like rabbits, leaving around fifteen pennies on the sidewalk. The cops usually pocketed this small change. It was one of our grievances. We often suspected them of being moralists for the sake of this petty graft.

Nigger didn't run. He bent down calmly and picked up the pennies. He was defying the cop. The cop swelled up like a turkey with purple rage. He slammed Nigger with his club across the spine. Nigger was knocked to the sidewalk. The cop forced the pennies out of Nigger's hand.

"Yuh little bastard," said the cop, "I'll ship yuh to the reformatory yet!"

Nigger stood up quietly, and walked away. His face was hard. Five minutes later a brick dropped from the sky and just missed the cop's skull.

It was Nigger's grim reply. The cop rushed up to the roof, and chased Nigger. But Nigger was too daring to be caught. He leaped gaps between the tenements like a mountain goat. He was ready to die for justice. The cop was not as brave.

For months Nigger remembered to drop bricks, bundles of gar-



Drawn by Dorothy Owen

Tenement Death

bage and paper bags filled with water on this cop's head. It drove the man crazy. But he could never catch the sombre little ghost. But he spread the word that Nigger was a bad egg, due for the reformatory. This cop's name was Murph. It was he who later tipped the balances that swung Nigger into his career of gangster.

5. *A Magic Spot*

Delancey Street was being torn up to be converted into Schiff Parkway, and there were acres of empty lots there.

On our East Side, suffocated with miles of tenements, an open space was a fairy-tale gift to children.

Air, space, weeds, elbow room: one sickened for space on the East Side, any kind of marsh or wasteland to testify that the world was still young, and wild and free.

My gang seized upon one of these Delancey street lots, and turned it, with the power of imagination, into a vast western plain.

We buried pirate treasure there, and built snow forts. We played football and baseball through the long beautiful days. We dug caves, and with Peary explored the North Pole. We camped there at night under the stars, roasting sweet potatoes that were sweeter because stolen.

It was there I vomited over my first tobacco, and first marvelled at the profundities of sex. It was there I first came to look at the sky.

The elevated train anger was not heard there. The shouting of peddlers like an idiot asylum, the East Side danger and traffic rumble and pain, all were shut by a magic fence out of this boy's Nirvana.

Shabby old ground, ripped like a battlefield by workers' picks and shovels, little garbage dump lying forgotten in the midst of tall tenements, O home of all the twisted junk, rusty baby carriages, lumber, bottles, boxes, mouldy pants and dead cats of the neighborhood—everyone spat and held the nostrils when passing you. But in my mind you still blaze in a halo of childish romance. No place will ever seem as wonderful again.

We had to defend our playground by force of arms. This made it even more romantic.

One April day, Abie, Jakie, Stinker and I were playing tipcat under the blue sky. The air was warm. Yellow mutts moved dreamily on the garbage. The sun covered the tenements with gold.

Pools of melted snow shone in the mud. An old man smoked his pipe and watched us.

Boys feel the moments of beauty but can't express them except through a crazy exuberance. We were happy. Suddenly a bomb shattered the peace.

The Forsythe Street boys, our enemies, whooped down like a band of Indians. They were led by Butch, that dark fearless boy whose "rep" was formidable as Nigger's.

They proceeded to massacre us. There were about fifteen of them. Abie and Jake were buried under a football pyramid of arms and legs. Stinker, who had earned his nickname because he would whine, beg, weep and stool-pigeon his way out of a bad mess, howled for mercy. Butch worked on me. It was a duel between a cockroach and a subway train.

At last they permitted us to get to our feet.

"Listen, you guys," said Butch, sneering as he wiped his hands on his seat, "this dump belongs to us Forsythe Streeters, see? Get the hell out."

We ran off, glad to escape alive. Our shirts were torn, our stockings chewed off, we were muddy and wounded and in disgrace. We found Nigger. He was loaded with an immense bundle of men's coats which he was bringing to his family from the factory. His family worked at home, and this was his daily chore.

He turned pale with rage when he heard of the massacre. All that afternoon strategy was discussed. We spied on the Forsythe Streeters, we visited the Eldridge Streeters and formed an alliance against the common enemy.

The very next day the historic battle was fought. Some of our boys stole tops of washboilers at home, and used them as shields. Others had tin swords, sticks, black-jacks. The two armies slaughtered each other in the street. Bottles were thrown, heads cut open. Nigger was bravest of the brave.

We won back our playground. And after that we posted sentries, and enjoyed passwords, drills, and other military ritual. The old maid teachers would have been horrified to see us practice their principal teaching: War. War.

6. A Boy's Head

But the Schiff Parkway was an opponent we could not defeat. It robbed us of our playground at last.

A long concrete path was finally laid out, with anemic trees and lines of benches where jobless workers sit in summer.

We went back to our crowded street. Joey Cohen was killed by the horse car not long afterward.

He had stolen a ride, and in jumping, fell under the wheels. The people around saw the flash of his body, and then heard his horrible scream.

The car rolled on. The people rushed to the tracks and picked up the broken body of my playmate.

O, what a horrible joke happened. The head was missing. Policemen arrived. Joey's father and mother screamed and moaned, everyone searched, but the head could not be found.

Later it was discovered under the car, hanging from the bloody axle.

Our gang was depressed by this accident. Jake Gottlieb said he would never steal another ride on a horse car. But Nigger, to show how brave he was, stole a ride that very afternoon.

Joey was the dreamy boy in spectacles who was so sorry when he killed the butterfly. He was always reading books, and had many queer ideas. It was he who put the notion in my head of becoming a doctor. I had always imagined I wanted to be a fireman.

JULIO MELLA

Julio Mella, a brilliant young Cuban writer and student leader, was assassinated last month in Mexico City. He was walking in the street with Tina Modotti, the artist who contributes photographs to the NEW MASSES, when two men fired on him from a window. Mella was secretary of the Cuban Anti-Imperialist League. He was active in the fight against the insidious enslavement of Latin-America by Wall Street. That was his crime. He was undoubtedly executed for it by orders from some Wall Street Mussolini. We mourn the loss of the brave young rebel. We hope the agitation among the Latin-American workers over his murder will increase. This is a Matteoti case.

GYPSIES

*You beautiful hall-room poet,
Aesthetic shut-in,
Escape-from-life futilitarian,
Beauty-seeker,
Beauty-monger—
You . . . you!
Coughing consumptive lyrics
To the vagrant salubrity
Of the toys in Romanyland,
Why don't you get out and try it?*

*You well-fed newspaper hack,
Rolling on balloon tires
From an overstuffed lounge
To a form-fit office chair,
And back again;
Padding your daily column
With footloose poems,—
You fat-buttocked,
Short-winded,
Haughty old bluffer, you!
Blaa! blaa! blaa!*

*And you day-bed poetess,
Marcelled, manicured, powdered, perfumed;
"Mated to Wanderlust"—
But in name only!
How would you like
To be a thousand miles from nowhere
And without Listerine?*

H. H. LEWIS.

THE GREAT POET

*He shall come, naked, with raw words, with blood redder than
red and richer than black.*

The sky has radioed it and the sun has promised.

*Sappho, Homer, Chancer, Milton, their graves shall warp in envy
of The Great Poet, the man from an elected orb, from an
inventive sphere other than earth.*

He shall be The Great Poet, the Engineer Of The World!

*Something like a cyclone sweeping through a "boom city," some-
thing like a sea rushing madly down a busy avenue, his
alarm and fierce fury will stop the world on its own pivot.*

*His songs will be songs of men gone wild and men to come, of men
greater than the Dead Great.*

*He shall come brandishing the moon and a star in his hands and
in his mouth the smoke of industry, and his raw words shall
be like rain over the land flooding, in a forty day spree, the
cities and the hills.*

And the world shall be still and calm while he sings.

ALBERT EDWARD CLEMENTS.

AUGUST 22, 1927

*Bartolo Vanzetti wrote a poem about a nightingale,
Singing in Italy, in an April long ago.*

Nick Sacco sent a letter to his little son:

*"Take your mother to the country, gathering flowers here and
there."*

*They were soldiers in a war, in the great war of the future,
The good shoemaker and the poor fishpeddler,
And they died greatly, as they had lived.*

*When you hear a bird singing, remember Sacco and Vanzetti.
When you see a wild flower growing, remember Sacco and Vanzetti
Remember justice crucified in Boston;
Remember how America rewards the justice-lovers;
Remember that the great war needs other soldiers.*

MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD.