

EXCERPTS/GROWING UP IN THE LIVING ROOM (April 1987)  
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When I wrote this paper in 1987, I re-considered the significant influences on my personal and professional development. The authors, Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, in their book, *Life is With the People: The Culture of the Shtetl*, provided a metaphor for my formative years.

I was born just before America entered World War II, in Sunnyside, Queens, a few subways-stops from Manhattan. It was so close; I could see the spires of the city coming into view as I neared the top of a hill mid-way on my route to P.S. 150. The neighborhood (it wasn't called community then) was typical of the hundreds of little villages or towns throughout the five boroughs of New York City at that time. Although you couldn't possibly know everyone, you felt none of the anonymity usually associated with living in New York. The corner grocer knew you and kept track of your accomplishments; the other mothers looked out for you when your mother guiltily returned to work.

Life had to be with people since my mother, father, sister and I shared a first floor, one bedroom apartment looking out on a sunless courtyard [on 45<sup>th</sup> Street between Skillman and 43<sup>rd</sup> Avenues]. The living room was our shtetl. The table had to be pulled away from the wall each evening and my sister Jenny and I had to make reservations in advance for the one comfortable armchair.

My parents slept in the door-less living room; we ate dinner there and sat around the radio in the evenings, drawing or knitting and listening to *The Great Gildersleeve*, *The Halls of Ivy*, *Baby Snooks*, and *Our Miss Brooks*. A love of popular culture was shared by my parents--my father played "Cavalcade of Hits Through the Years" on the piano while we sang along; my mother could identify every actor and director in all the movies since the talkies came in. Culture in the living room was also to be found in the dozens of books on special shelves that my father had cantilevered to hang over their double bed and the dining room table. It was alive in the countless conversations, arguments and jokes about life and art during meals with family and friends. Everybody was included and distinctions of age were never made unless the discussions went past bedtime. The only time my sister and I were excluded [from a conversation] was when my parents needed privacy and spoke in Yiddish to escape from our eternal presence.

There were two communities in Sunnyside when I was growing up--the one white, Jewish and middle class and the other--white, Catholic and working class. Most of the Catholic children went to parochial school and after supper, before it got dark, they would regale the rest of us with horror stories of nuns with rulers, incarcerations in locked wardrobes, and even the Jewish crimes against Christ.

Sunnyside was [also] the home of many well-known intellectuals and radicals, including famous Communists later blacklisted by McCarthy. A red diaper baby, I was constantly involved in bitter arguments to and from school with the children of right-wing socialists (bitter enemies of the Communists or Progressives, as they called themselves). . .

P.S. 150 was pure pleasure in comparison. It was a progressive school which meant that we didn't have homework; there was no set schedule for subjects; and art seemed to be part of everything. Our class stayed together in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades with Mrs. Edna R. Musnik, who, like my father, spent hours on various topics, often at the expense of subjects like math and reading. We wrote our own plays and painted the scenery. School during that period seemed highly consistent with life in the living room.

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I realize now that my office at Pratt Institute was like my living room in Sunnyside. It was small, noisy, and crowded with students and faculty; while I complained about the fact that I can't get "work" done in school, I wonder if I was secretly glad to have found myself another living room shtetl to grow in.