

# BROOKLYN JOE AND SAL

## *Two Bensonhurst Boys*

Chapter Five: <b>Uncle Jijie</b> (1962) .....	35
Chapter Six: <b>No Way to Make a Living</b> (1962, 1966) .....	43
Chapter Seven: <b>School of Hard Knocks</b> (1962, 1963) .....	49
Chapter Eight: <b>April is the Cruellest Month</b> (1963).....	59
Chapter Nine: <b>Parkie: Green Kid in a Concrete Park</b> (1963) ..	63
Chapter Ten: <b>The West End Line</b> (forever) .....	73
Chapter Eleven: <b>Welcome to Dixie</b> (1964).....	81
Chapter Twelve: <b>Stories About Growing Up</b> (1965) .....	93
Chapter Thirteen: <b>Honduras, Two Summer Landings</b> (1964, 1966).....	105
Chapter Fourteen: <b>Boy Dazed in the Bays: Gravesend, Chesapeake, Narragansett</b> (Summer, 1965) .....	117

<b>PART II: A MAN-CHILD BEYOND</b> (1966 to 1990).....	127
Chapter Fifteen: <b>Durham: Return to Dixie</b> (1966–1972) ....	129
Chapter Sixteen: <b>Registration</b> Duke (1966) to Military (1971) .....	147

Chapter Seventeen: <b>Beautiful Ethereal Huila</b> (Cali, Colombia, 1972) . . . . .	153
Chapter Eighteen: <b>Life Can Be Like an Umpire’s Call— Yah Nevah Know</b> (Cali, 1973) . . . . .	159
Chapter Nineteen: <b>A Brooklyn Wasteland</b> (ca. 1976) . . . . .	165
Chapter Twenty: <b>I Almost Took the Cake</b> (Columbia, MO, 1980) . . . . .	169
Chapter Twenty-One: <b>Bensonhurst Man-Child in Bahston</b> (Boston, 1989–1990) . . . . .	175
<b>PART III: BENSONHURST MAN</b> (2000 to the Present) . . . . .	185
Chapter Twenty-Two: <b>Bensonhurst Man in Spain</b> (2000–2001 and beyond) . . . . .	187
Chapter Twenty-Three: <b>Bensonhurst Man in Argentina</b> (2005) . . . . .	205
Chapter Twenty-Four: <b>Bensonhurst Man Back in Bensonhurst: Angelo’s Barbershop</b> (2012–2013) . . . . .	219
Chapter Twenty-Five: <b>Mothers Are in Bensonhurst, and Everywhere</b> (forever) . . . . .	225
Chapter Twenty-Six: <b>Four Old Men on an Island Off Maine</b> (July 2022) . . . . .	233
<b>EPILOGUE</b>	
<b>A Sixtieth High School Reunion</b> (NY City, June 2022) . . . . .	247
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b> . . . . .	253
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> . . . . .	258

I love his name, so operatic, and yet so Brooklyn. Salvatore La Puma (1929–2008) received the Flannery O’Connor Short Fiction Award for *The Boys of Bensonhurst* (University of Georgia

Press, 1987). I was born in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood fifteen years after Mr. La Puma and stayed until leaving for college though Bensonhurst and I never parted ways. Bensonhurst breeds stories, which I usually exchange with *paesani*, *landsmen*, and ex-pats in general from the old neighborhood. Mr. La Puma's stories were "fictional." Mine are recollections, to the extent that my recall is reliable, complete, and unbiased (fat chance). With this collection, my aim is to outline *some* of the influences on this Italian kid born near the end of World War II. Multiethnic inputs imprinted me from the start at the Bensonhurst Maternity Hospital across from the Jewish Community House on Bay Parkway and 79<sup>th</sup> Street. JCH activities kept Mamma awake, as if I needed help.

On my first birthday, July 16, 1945, America detonated the first atomic bomb in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Three weeks later, World War II was effectively over when we unleashed an A-bomb on Hiroshima, putting me on the cusp of the postwar baby boom. Twenty-one years after Los Alamos, I had been a college graduate

for a whole month. That Bachelor of Science did not turn this Bensonhurst boy to a man. Rather, it was a road marker in my exploration of the internal and external influences I experienced when I moved out of Bensonhurst—which still leaves its mark on my life.

Immigrants entered Bensonhurst from the *shtetls* and ghettos of Eastern Europe or from Southern Italian slums and hardscrabble villages. But mostly they came from stops on generic Delancey Streets and each Little Italy of Manhattan. Bensonhurst was a rung on the ladder to the American dream.

Bensonhurst is romanticized in popular culture. It is the neighborhood of Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden in TV's *The Honeymooners* (1955), of the elevated train chase in *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, director, 1971), of James Buchanan (really, New Utrecht) High of TV's *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975), and of John Travolta's Tony Manero, the Disco Don of *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, director, 1977). By the way, the train in *The French Connection* went by our linoleum store three times.

Very few viewers noticed.

For the immigrants of La Puma's stories (1939-1943), Bensonhurst was a meaner place of working-class families, numbers runners, loan sharks, hot and dusty garment sweatshops, social clubs of "guys in fedoras," bookie joints, pool halls, corner bars, and at least one factory that produced counterfeit olive oil. Business protection could be bought from the fedoras, at premiums hard to refuse.

But my Bensonhurst and La Puma's also had rooftop pigeon coops for hobbyists, heavenly pastry shops (*pasticerrie*), bakeries, and pizzerias, often combined into one, and within walking distance. Among others: DeFilippi, Reliable, and Mondiale. Other shops specialized in bagels, *bialys*, and onion boards. I was often sent across 86<sup>th</sup> Street to pick up rye bread and *challah* from Schlom and Deutch Bakery. And 86<sup>th</sup> Street still features

open-air markets where you can bargain for fresh artichokes, buy a live eel, or be serenaded by frustrated tenors. People sat on evening summer stoops variously enjoying Italian ices, Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray soda, a pastrami on rye, whatever, while the kids played sidewalk games or street stickball. All were welcome to summertime parish street festivals featuring songs from the old country, dollar bill-robed saints in procession, games of chance, and incredible food. Family ties were strong over the years of La Puma's stories, before and during World War II, and just before I came on the scene. They were still strong when I left for graduate school in summer 1966.

Two years after La Puma's 1987 book, Bensonhurst gained notoriety as the neighborhood of the killer(s) of young Black Yusuf Hawkins. The Hawkins incident became an Italian versus Black *cause célèbre*, and that especially hurts. Then again, I look at the camaraderie of the multiracial high school athletic teams of Lincoln and New Utrecht. There is always hope.

Mamma visited a Bensonhurst march organized by Reverend Al Sharpton in support of justice for Hawkins. She offered a "peace" button to a marching lady, uttering "peace" with the gesture. The lady looked at Mamma and the button, and responded with "F—— peace, I want war." Ensued an intemperate response by



Mamma which she regretted the rest of her life.

Michael Grandé Polacco, my musician brother, had a colleague, Bruce Johnson, who lived in a Black enclave at the south end of very Italian 18<sup>th</sup> Ave. Bruce was a superb jazz guitarist and the son of Austin Johnson of the Ink Spots, nationally popular vocal group of the '30s and '40s. Bruce was the last Bensonhurst acquaintance I encountered en route to La Guardia Airport, and thence to grad school at Duke University. The chance meeting took place late summer 1966 over hot dogs and crinkle-cut fries at Nathan's Famous in Coney Island. Bruce gave me both a hearty

greeting and a warm send-off to the postgraduate “man-child phase” of my life.

Bensonhurst today has a few dwindling and shrinking Italian enclaves, surrounded by people of other ethnicities, mainly Chinese. Change happens, and people always decry the new residents. (I must say that many *paesani* who couldn't wait to flee Bensonhurst now fill Facebook pages pining over the lost treasure of the good old days.) Seymour W, a Jewish buddy of my stepfather, told me that “only the last names change, but it's still the same complaint” about the next immigrant wave. True, perhaps, but skin color and Asian features are more indelible than accents, or names that can be hyphenated or anglicized. And Stepdad's same friend also defended the very large families of Orthodox Jews: “They're saving the white race.” At the time, I did not fully appreciate that Seymour implied the danger of *replacement*.

The concept of replacement of whites is now lodged in my ageing brain. On a recent visit to Manhattan, I loved seeing Black and Latino help at Katz's Deli on Houston Street and at Kossar's Bagels/Bialys on Grand. Not only the staff but the clientele was multicolored. If this is replacement, bring it on. May the ranks of the owners as well acquire new colors and accents. And, duhhh, . . . my white cousins (can I get a familial embrace?): Don't keep reducing each other's ranks, as in the Napoleonic Wars, WWI, WWII, Russia-Ukraine, and other blood baths. Stay home, already warm the conjugal bed

home, already, warm the conjugat sea.

*Haarlem* and *Nieu Amsterdam/New York* reflect New York's Dutch and English origins. May that history not diminish those indigenous cultures that occupied the coastal North Atlantic thousands of years before European immigrant "explorers" such as John Cabot (née Giovanni Caboto), Henry Hudson, and Giovanni da Verrazzano visited their eponymous coastal waterways. The etymology of Bensonhurst is more prosaic—in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century it was named after developer Arthur Benson, president of Brooklyn Gas Light Company.

We Bensonhurst citizens don't like to acknowledge Bath Beach, the approximately five-avenue strip between Gravesend Bay and Bensonhurst's major business thoroughfare, 86<sup>th</sup> Street. Some of La Puma's scenes were on the Bath Beach waterfront. The Bensonhurst–Bath Beach boundary line may run through the middle of 86<sup>th</sup>, putting much of my youth in Bath Beach. *OK, OK, so who's doin' a soivey?* as they probably still say in the neighborhood. And both sides of 86<sup>th</sup> have the same 11214 zip code, so there.

Bensonhurst was my launch pad and is still my ground control, offering a perspective throughout my life's trajectory. As you travel along with my Bensonhurst and post-Bensonhurst adventures, you will come to know those perspectives too.

I hope the late Mr. La Puma would have agreed that I at least partially stayed on course.

via blind faith or open-eyed science:  
May both ways converge for this youth  
Seeking to forge a feasible alliance

Salvatore La Puma grew up in a very Italian pocket of Bensonhurst and wrote much of young people's relationship with the Catholic Church. I came along fifteen years after Mr. La Puma, and that short generation time marked some differences between us. Yes, I am Italian American, and my neighborhood overall was roughly equal parts Italian and Jewish. Italian meant Catholic, and Jewish, *oy vey*, usually meant Reformed. We certainly mixed, and intermarried, as also occurred in La Puma's Bensonhurst. Some of the most "flamboyant" young people of my boyhood were products of such mixed marriages. I don't ascribe flamboyance

3

#### BROOKLYN JOE AND SAL

to hybrid vigor, perhaps more to stimulation in a mixed-culture home environment. As a geneticist, I often faced the G x E conundrum—Genetic versus Environmental influences on gene expression. In Bensonhurst, some could be convinced that G x E was *goy x eshkenazi*.

Italians and Jews both believe in family, and food. In my boyhood, Italians were more likely to grow produce in front and back yards: eggplants, tomatoes, basil (*basilicò*), calabash (*cucuzza*, or *goo-gootz* in street slang), etc. Many *paesani* produced their own figs and wine, and backyard chickens and rooftop pigeon coops could provide animal protein. Jews tended to live in apartments in larger buildings though over the years Jews as well became enlightened urban farmers.

My aim is not to distinguish Ashkenazi/Eshkenazi Jews from Southern Italians, but rather to distinguish my religious youth from that portrayed by Mr. La Puma. Salvatore's local Catholic parish was more than a meeting place for Sunday Mass, it was a community center, and the effigies spoke to the faithful. In *The Jilted Groom [1940]*,<sup>1</sup> young Vito Conti could hear the wooden



Christ on His cross *kvetching/complaining* in His “Sicilian hoarseness” about the church’s cold air, and how He could have been somebody back in the old country. (The soliloquy itself is worth the price of the book, and it could have been uttered about America in general by the hood’s ancient immigrants who mixed benediction and blasphemy.)

I lost out on these ecclesiastical connections: In my preadolescence, I was steered away from the Catholic Church. I became a Jehovah’s Witness. I have not confessed this to many.

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<sup>1</sup> References to La Puma’s Bensonhurst stories are given by *Chapter Title [story year]*.

## TWO BENSONHURST BOYS

Back then, I feared that the *deep Vatican State* would know of my wayward ways. Now, I am screaming them to my readership, limited though it may be.

The Witnesses of Brooklyn were laudable in that they “co-housed” Italians, Jews, and people of all other races and colors. Yet, within that house, I had my own private room. How was I “steered” into my cell within an organized religion/sect that walled itself off from the world at large? At this distance, I try to order chronological events.

My Sicilian stepfather was probably the conduit. I believe he was a Witness before he entered my life but was “disfellowshipped” under circumstances I can never confirm, and I will not invent possible scenarios. To me, Stepdad was always a good man, tormented by his own mortality. His estranged wife, a neighborhood woman I (thankfully) never met, was a Witness in good standing. The oldest of her four children, Eloisa, for as long as I knew her, was very committed to the religion, self-named *The Truth*. Eloisa’s mother remained in *The Truth* until her passing, well before my mother’s 2013 passing.

My first recollection of the Witnesses was Mamma taking me to a meeting in a sparsely appointed hall. This 10/11-year-old had no idea what was going on. I knew no one, and Stepdad



was not there. But people were friendly. I was escorted to a few more meetings and then eventually started going on my own. After a couple of years, I found myself a “member.” There was no inflection point, no membership card—being in good standing entailed weekly Bible study in a small group at a Witness’s home and evening meetings (Thursday and Sunday) in a Kingdom Hall (our spartan “parish”). But our *raison d’être* was door-to-door proselytizing, Saturday and/or Sunday mornings—hence,

5

### BROOKLYN JOE AND SAL

“Witnessing.” There was pressure to do incidental witnessing in daily life, as in around the office water cooler or in a school locker room.

I tried mightily to avoid incidental witnessing. Door-to-door was scary enough, each opening portal a possible unveiling of my religious affiliation to an acquaintance or relative. Just standing at the threshold in my jacket and tie, with Bible in hand, a satchel of literature, and accompanied by an earnest, beaming colleague, was an eloquent testimony.

Within the Kingdom Hall, experiences were not all negative. For one, the Hall helped my public speaking. I was obliged to read assigned Bible passages to the whole congregation. Later in my development, I presented prepared talks on a biblical passage or an article in the organization’s magazines, either *Awake* or *The Watchtower*. The former offered commentary on the sorry state





Another harbinger of end times.

6

## TWO BENSONHURST BOYS

of This World, the latter a more rigorous dissection of biblical passages, especially as they pertained to the “end times.” I do not recall females making such presentations, and at the time I did not even think about it. A positive aspect of presenting was that I was obliged to wear a jacket and tie, which occasioned compliments from some of the ladies.

Through all this, I was pretty much a ‘Lone Ranger Witness’ within my family, though Mamma did attend my presentations and Stepdad always gave me car fare to the Hall. Why did I maintain an association? Difficult to answer: Yes, there was “fellowship,” and girls my age were a draw. I think one “hook” was the possibility that the Witnesses might be right, and I had better not waste the opportunity to be saved—better to heed the Word than to hear and then reject It. Older folks, possibly assigned mentors, took an interest in my spiritual development. While we traded observations on baseball, Sputnik, and current events, it was clear I was not to be of that World. I was a rabid Brooklyn Dodgers fan, which was akin to idolatry, and they used that word. I was torn between two worlds.

At the age of thirteen or fourteen I was baptized—immersed in a downtown Brooklyn YMCA pool. I was in a state of astonishment on the lonely subway ride home. Somehow, my kid brother escaped all this internal turmoil.

*What have I done? Is there no going back? What will be expected of me now?*

Of course, I should have asked those questions before being held under the water. To use Bensonhurst terms, I’ve always been a little *meshuggeneh*, a *stunad*, a little crazy, too dumb, and too easy. My partner Nancy has told me, more than once, “Good thing you weren’t born a girl.”

## BROOKLYN JOE AND SAL

In general, it was not easy for anyone to be a “Witness.” Though we lived in This World, we were apart from it. We were law-abiding but refused the draft and did not pledge allegiance—to me a recurring torture as I felt eyes on me during this daily school exercise. Receiving a blood transfusion was a sure way to be denied everlasting life in Jehovah’s New World, the earth remade to a paradise wherein the lion lays down with the lamb.

Current events as always seemed to be driving us to Armageddon—the defeat of Satan in the ultimate battle, his casting off from the earth, which was to be transformed into the New World of the righteous, many of whom to be resurrected to eternal life.

**My love for baseball clashed with *The Truth*.** I played one year on the St. Bernadette parish entry in the Coney Island Grasshopper League for twelve-year-olds. On “opening day” my teammates and I, in our new uniforms, stood on the lawn outside the Knights of Columbus Hall (86<sup>th</sup> St. and 13<sup>th</sup> Ave.) for a blessing by the monsignor, perched on a balcony as if a local Pope. Later, came the Babe Ruth and Police Athletic Leagues, and high school teams. I so envied teammates who were encouraged by their parish to play sports. In their world, there was no conflict between baseball and religion. One of my teammates, Morty Ehrlich, was Jewish and no problem there either.

Entering the St. Bernadette League of “organized baseball” was joyous. A couple of buddies and I walked to the parish in Dyker Heights and signed up. I had to return with parental signatures and registration money to make it official, but before making it back to Bensonhurst we were confronted by three local guys our age. Socioeconomically, Dyker Heights was a step or two up from Bensonhurst. That night we defended the honor of Bensonhurst.



## TWO BENSONHURST BOYS

One memorable Sunday morning, I had clashing commitments—proselytize door-to-door or play in a Coney Island League game. Satan and Jehovah were on opposite shoulders, and I was inclined to ignore both—when I heard my name coming through my bedroom window. Some teammates and my coach were calling for me from Mr. Spadaro’s verdant Sicilian-style vineyard and garden around the block and behind our building. I called out to them from my side of the chain-link fence. That morning I was pushed toward Satan but had a great time playing a good game. And my teammates knew nothing of my religion, or sinning ways.

Mamma never attended a game, and Stepdad never took me to one—I walked, took a bus or subway, or caught a ride with a coach or a teammate’s parent to the appointed diamond. Mamma worked every day, in a garment sweatshop or at home where, in addition to housekeeping, she made apparel to order and did alterations.

Stepdad did attend my first awards night, in the St. Bernadette Confraternity Hall, and was in shock when I was awarded our team MVP (and shook hands onstage with Dodgers legends Happy Felton and Gino Cimoli). Stepdad thanked my coaches, but an *Ozzie and Harriet* household we were not. I can’t help conjecturing that a 16-year-old Anthony Fauci may have been in the audience that night. He lived on 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue one block from the parish.

My best buddy, Petey LaMontia, was my first baseball school. We played all year round, just as long as there was no snow, mud or puddles on the dirt infield of the Bensonhurst Park diamond, hard by Trump’s Shore Haven Apartments. Our baseballs were often taped up, but we saved up for the joyous occasional purchase



of a brand-new ball. It seems now like we spent hours pitching to each other, fielding grounders, or chasing down fungoes. (Petey agrees.)

Then there were other schools: Father Varriale of St. Bernadette was a knowledgeable and driving baseball coach. He advised us to take up catching if we wanted to advance far in baseball. Catching was as close as he got to catechism.

**My love for biology clashed with *The Truth*.** Evolution was anathema to the Witnesses—a false doctrine. Of course, paraphrasing Theodosius Dobzhansky (an evolutionary biologist/geneticist *and* a devout Christian) biology only makes sense through the lens of evolution, and I was very much into biology. *Awake* used biological discoveries to expound on Jehovah’s wonderful creation, but never found any example to buttress evolutionary theory. At the Stuyvesant High School of Science in Lower Manhattan, I became more “of this world,” more under Satan’s influence. The West End Express took me twice daily over the Manhattan Bridge on my scholarly commute. In each direction, the bridge offered a full view of the Witnesses’ Brooklyn-based world headquarters, its neon lights announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom. While I stopped heeding their messages, apparently Wall Street, on the Manhattan side of the East River, was alert. “Dead Will Rise” meant that it was worth investing in dead stocks. Ya gotta love capitalist cynicism.

I will always love my mother—an incredibly generous and caring person. But I could not understand why I was the toe she dipped into the waters of the Witnesses. At the time, she and Stepdad had serious issues with the Catholic Church, and none of our family of four had anything to do with it. (And my peers knew, if only because I was the only Italian kid in my class not to

bear the forehead smudge on Ash Wednesday.) My mother did have a reawakening, and over the last fifty years of her life she was a devout Catholic and found serious fault with the Witnesses. I accompanied her to Mass in Bensonhurst, in Columbia, Missouri, and in Madrid, Spain.

I had drifted far from The Truth during my three years attending Stuyvesant High School. The epiphany came in college during a freshman botany lecture that featured an amazing real-time video of an onion root cell nucleus undergoing mitosis. *That's it, I'm in. I'm a scientist—my lifestyle for learning “the truth.”*

But, end of internal conflict? *What if the Witnesses were right by some quirk in logic? Where would that leave me? And why, far from my Brooklyn home, did I not want to answer the door when they “called?”*

I took furtive steps on that rocky road  
Then sampling a spiritual delicatessen  
I turned to the fasting my vision bestowed

My association with the Jehovah's Witnesses wasn't all pangs of guilt, internal conflict, and embarrassment. Did I mention the girls? And I did have a sports outlet in a good buddy from a family of converts from Judaism. Now, culturally they were very Jewish—almost TV stereotypes. Philip R and family lived in predominantly Jewish Brighton Beach, one beach over from Coney Island. They were well-off. Dad was a Broadway agent of some kind. Sam and his wife had three strapping boys and one beautiful daughter, Naomi. I was buddies with the baby, Philip. *How could Philip manage to live a normal life in very Jewish Brighton?* I'm sure his

BROOKLYN JOE AND SAL



Left: **Vina, Jijie and Ben, 2, 6 and 7 years-old (May 1927).**

Vina was meant to be a momma. At two in May 1927, she was already involved in her brothers' imbroglios. She had the genes to rear a middle guard, though I was able to trim down my gams (Chapter 7). The fourth, Angie, had not been born at picture time.

Right: **Mamma in our back-of-store kitchen during my college days, 1962-1966 (and into the mid-70's).** Sure we had three rooms, but they were petite, as was our only kitchen sink (*M. deSade Designs, Inc.*).



My back hurts as I look at mamma at the sink.

In truth, we also had a bathroom sink. And the bath tub could serve culinary purposes, such as holding a pot of marine snails, on which the lid was left ajar to let in light, thereby catching the snails peering out, ready to throw into a sauce. After playing with the snails for a while, I once left the lid completely off, obliging us to pull our dinner off bathtub and bathroom walls.



## TWO BENSONHURST BOYS

buddies all knew of his family's incompatible religion that, for instance, fervently believed Jesus was the son of God. (Whose name Jehovah, at least, was derived from the Hebrew *Yahweh*.)

I loved visiting with Philip, to play some hoops in a beachfront park or just to hang out. And there were girls, most of them Jewish. A vivid memory is looking into the eyes of a Jewish young lady in front of a jukebox, as she swayed and resonated with the music and lyrics of "Little Star." Now, the song was by the Elegants, five nice Italian boys who gave informal performances under the boardwalk in South Beach, Staten Island (thank you, Wikipedia). "Little Star" came out in 1958, the summer I turned fourteen. So, this very cute Jewish gal was *on* the Brighton boardwalk, making her own cultural connection with doo-wop from *under* another boardwalk. When I think of such weird social and cultural juxtapositions I can only say "what a country!" It sounds better in a Yiddish accent.

Philip and I were on competing teams in a baseball league that played most of its games at the Lincoln High School field in Coney Island. Philip's Jewish coach was gruff and aggressive. His Italian wife was very much his co-coach. She was a spitfire during games. But before and after she always asked me how my hitting was coming along, while choking up on an imaginary bat.

Four young Jehovah's Witnesses (Philip and I plus another Italian, and another youth) worked like animals over several sticky summer days steaming paper off the walls in Philip's apartment. Mr. R rewarded us with good tickets to *West Side Story* at the Winter Garden Theatre. I never would have experienced the show and the Broadway scene if I had stayed within my Bensonhurst circles. Chita Rivera as Anita was amazing. More amazing to me was the well-dressed, out-of-town, WASP audience getting so

## BROOKLYN JOE AND SAL

much into New York City's gang conflicts—to me a forgettable



much like New York City's gang culture — to me a forgettable and deplorable aspect of city life.

By the end of my three years at Stuyvesant, my association with the Witnesses was moribund, but I did still hang with Philip. At Brighton Beach just after high school graduation, one of Philip's friends asked how I did on the (New York State) Regents physics exam. My score in the low-90s won respect from both the guys and girls. So, I was not exactly chopped liver. That I was headed to Cornell also held sway, and not once that day did a discussion of religion enter the picture.

The older of Philip's two brothers was a legendary fullback at Lincoln High—another link to This World, this old system of things. But it did provide his bro a measure of respect among the flock. Philip's sister Naomi married a very good-looking and articulate Italian boy, Louis L. She was fair-skinned, a little freckled, with luminous hazel eyes, and just ever so slightly and alluringly *zaftig*. He was, well . . . tall, dark, and handsome (and fluent in two languages). Such a beautiful couple, and I can say that in both Italian and Yiddish intonation. They commandeered the Kingdom Hall to show slides of their European honeymoon. Yet, they became "Pioneers," dedicating their daily lives to announcing Jehovah's Kingdom, proselytizing. I could never have done that, not even with Naomi by my side.

Philip's father, Sam, could be a lovable character, like when he led the congregation in hymns by authoritatively plunking the Hall's piano keys with strong fat fingers, or when he partook of comfort food at the 65<sup>th</sup> Street Isaac Gellis Delicatessen, two doors away from the stairway to the Kingdom Hall. *Après* dinner, he'd take his place in the back of the audience, usually between two unoccupied folding chairs, and variously emanate *eau de* mustard,

## TWO BENSONHURST BOYS

sauerkraut, knish, kreplach, all-beef kosher hot dog, and other delicacies.

But Sam also showed a stern side. Philip's mom had given her son fifty cents before he left for the beach one day, and he

responded with “Oh rhapsody!” Such typical Jewish sarcasm was not appreciated. We were seated for lunch, and Sam was about to say grace. Philip looked over at his bearish dad and impatiently uttered, “Well?” to which Mrs. R grabbed Philip while Dad pulled off his own belt. He gave Philip a thrashing that brought proud son to tears. I feared for my own well-being but came through unscathed. That day I learned of Philip’s resentment against both parents.

You don’t have to be Italian, or Catholic, to come from a stressful home environment. I learned that before college—AP (Advanced Placement) credit for sure.

In La Puma’s *Gravesend Bay [1940]*, Mario chided his Sicilian wife for going so much to confession with Father Hartigan.

“What’s an Irishman know about Sicilian sins?”

To me, the Witnesses were much more ecumenical than the Catholic Church—all races and religions were thrown together in our minestrone of moral misery. We were bonded by sin and doubt. But I could not reconcile their faith with my “objective” belief structure. Then again, as an agnostic I ask, who knows the real Truth?

86<sup>th</sup> Street—between 22<sup>nd</sup> (Bay Parkway) and 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenues. That stretch was a warren of delis, food shops, outdoor and indoor produce, and *chachka* stands. It sounded and smelled like a casbah. Adding to the cacophony, the West End line ran above it. From the Bay Parkway station, the train went to Coney Island Beach in three stops (and three more on the Brighton Beach line to Philip R’s place). The other direction was labeled “To City,” to the wonders of Manhattan. Don’t cry for me; I felt privileged in either direction.

One of the Manhattan wonders was the Stuyvesant High School of Science, and my attendance there made me a nerd in Bensonhurst, at least on the street, which was roughly split between Italians and Jews. equal opportunity tough guys who

between Italians and Jews, equal opportunity tough guys who often engaged in wise guy (“wink”) collaborations—loan sharking, bookmaking, etc. There was a smattering of Latinos, Black folks, even some Irish, who seemed exotic to me. I survived because I was a halfway decent athlete, and I did not back down from a fight (and was usually on the verge of going berserk). Luckily, we young people didn’t use guns. The closest we came were zip guns, which are another story (see Chapter Nine).

My first language was probably Italian because as a babe I communicated with my caregiving grandmother in her Neapolitan dialect, at least my mother told me so. I don’t remember those very early days, but some linguistic trolley grooves must have been laid down. On those tracks, I was able to launch a passable fluency in Spanish, greatly aided by rigorous language training at Stuyvesant, and by a Dominican family who moved into an apartment a block from us on our side of 86<sup>th</sup>. They were

## TWO BENSONHURST BOYS

refugees from the turmoil following the assassination of dictator Generalísimo Trujillo. The family had daughters.

Did I say I was a nerd? One summer day, I corralled my kid bro to go on a nature trip, by train. Michael reluctantly agreed. He was disenchanted with school, chafing at following the academic success of his older brother. (We learned later that Michael was dyslexic. However, he communicated beautifully through his music, via his voice, guitar, songwriting, and poetic lyrics.) We got off at lovely, bucolic Central Park West and West 81<sup>st</sup> Street and climbed stone stairs to the American Museum of Natural History. It was palatial, as if a relic of Manhattan Brahmins of a time gone by. I loved the museum for the obvious reasons of the dinosaurs and dioramas. And admission was minimal back then. But the real lures for me were the huge collections of butterflies and beetles on public display, not locked in storage for research purposes, as they are now.

I was suspended in time, mesmerized by the bugs while Michael showed much forbearance. When we finally left the

building, my poor kid brother needed to clear his head, so we crossed the street and strolled through Central Park. We took a turn on a lovely pastoral path and came upon a group of young Latinos, and in those days that meant Puerto Ricans—recall *West Side Story*. They were giving us mean looks. One of the guys at a water fountain very dexterously directed a long stream of water at me. Direct hit. I gave him a mean look back. After all, I was from Bensonhurst and honor was currency anywhere: The code is not to back down, even when not on your own turf. Sal La Puma would have understood.

“Looks like a *faggot* [FAHY-gut] ta me,” one of the guys announced. Faggot had morphed from *fag* in those days, but I was not about to give a discourse on divergent etymologies.