

Service to Remnants of a Jewish Population in a Decaying Neighborhood in New York

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IN 1967, the decision was finally made to close the Y.M. and Y.W.H.A. located in the East Tremont area of the Bronx, New York,¹ as the neighboring Jewish community had virtually disappeared.

The Y, which had a lifespan of approximately 35 years had been based in three different areas in the East Bronx in the course of its existence, paralleling the movement of the Jewish population from changing and deteriorating neighborhoods. It finally made what was felt to be a permanent move to the East Tremont area.

East Tremont had been a thriving, bustling Jewish community, considered a good place to raise a family. The immigration in the 1950's and 60's of Black and Puerto Rican families resulted in major population changes.

The first Black people to move in were professional and middle-income workers. Though the original thrust, on a community level, was for integration, the host of subsequent problems including population density, overcrowding in schools bringing about double sessions, deteriorating housing, and a concomitant leap in crime-rate, resulted in many white families as well as middle-class Black families moving out. The principal of the local public school, accommodating some 2,000 students, informed us last year that the last White child had transferred out, which meant

in effect that no White family under the age of 50 remained in the area.

The Tremont area degenerated into a slum ghetto. Soon many of the apartment buildings were abandoned by landlords who had allowed them to deteriorate to such an extent that it became too costly and economically unfeasible to rehabilitate them, thus attracting a large number of alcoholics, addicts, derelicts and degenerates who have taken over the vacant buildings, some of which they have turned into what is commonly referred to as "dope factories."

The last remnants of the Jewish population remaining were elderly Jews, people ranging in age from 65 to the early 80's, trapped in the area either by economic circumstances or by an inability to risk leaving the familiar because of an undefined fear of the unknown and what might happen to them. This, despite the fact that they were being repeatedly mugged, molested and subjected to the humiliating experiences of physical search, including private areas of their bodies, in the muggers' quest for hidden money.

The services of the East Tremont Y had been phased out with the population decline and by 1967 what was left was a skeleton staff, a largely unused building, and a program only for older adults. The elderly people saw the Y as an oasis, a haven in an increasingly hostile surrounding community. The Associated Y.M. and Y.W.H.A.s, the parent agency, faced a dilemma. In prac-

¹ An affiliate of the Associated Y.M. and Y.W.H.A. of New York City.

tical service terms the East Tremont Y building could only be shut down. However, such a shut down could only have the effect of a desertion of the still not inconsiderable population of Jewish elderly persons in the neighborhood.

The East Tremont Y and Jewish Family Service had a past history of meaningful collaboration: among other cooperative activities, a J.F.S. caseworker had at times served on the Y premises as consultant, individual interviewer, referral specialist and so forth.

In November of 1968, the Associated Y.M. and Y.W.H.A.s and the Jewish Family Service undertook a joint project, wherein a more extensive casework service would be incorporated into the East Tremont Y for a year's period in order to make meaningful contact with as many of the elderly people as possible, to work out with them plans for assuring a safer, more satisfying kind of existence. The staff consisted of a J.F.S. senior case worker, who also supervised a Hunter College graduate student in Social Work, and a part time secretary. We assumed that housing relocation would be a major focus; but we also knew that some restoration of familial and kinship ties would be an important service for some and that for many—whether or not the objective situation could be shifted—a very essential experience could be afforded them by opening up even limited options for them so that some measure of choice could be introduced.

My immediate overall impression following my assignment to the Y in November of 1968 was that I was witnessing the institution nearing the end of its life, as staff and service were curtailed and membership dropped, and this was presenting a tremendous threat to the 400 odd members still affiliated with the Y. Tension mounted increasingly and was fed into by frequent rumors

that the Y building had been sold. The feeling of being abandoned in a hostile community where it became increasingly hazardous for elderly persons to walk through the streets even during daylight hours kept mounting. And it eventually erupted when a non-member entered the building and was attacked by some members for entering their "turf" without holding a membership card. The attack then developed into a free-for-all. We saw it as a last ditch stand by the elderly members of the Y against invaders taking over their sole remaining sanctuary.

The initial step in implementing the service project was to define the population. Accordingly a mailing was sent to those still affiliated with the Y. 325 members remained out of an original membership of 1,100. All of these were people 65 years of age and over. The response to our initial mailing showed that there were 98 individuals interested in services, 63 uninterested, and 164 who did not answer. Follow-through on the 164 revealed 122 lived outside the Tremont area and were already established and integrated in stable neighborhoods. Of the remainder, 42 were in-area residents, 39 of whom either had plans to move or were satisfied with remaining where they were, usually because they were not living alone, having either a relative, roomer or boarder sharing their quarters. This group had maintained minimal contact with the Y. Some of them had found a way of life by alternating their winter and summer periods between Miami, Florida and the Catskill Mountains. Three of this in-area group requested help in moving.

As part of the procedural interview we also used a questionnaire designed by the Research Department of the Associated Y.M. and Y.W.H.A.s. This thirteen-page questionnaire sought so-

cial data, such as the length of their stay in the community, type of housing, economic circumstances, numbers in the family, health and educational status, and so forth. There were also some questions relating to personal references and attitude, family relationships and degree of interest in relocation.

The picture that emerged from the interviews with the first 75 persons showed them as falling within the category of the elderly (65 to 81 years of age) their mean age being 72 years; of East European background; having settled in the East Tremont area some 20 to 50 years ago, most of them coming up from the lower East Side of New York City. Some of them had settled in the East Tremont area of the Bronx directly on arrival from Europe. Most of the males had worked in the garment industry or in trades such as barbers, butchers and painters. Some of them had owned small grocery or hardware stores. Their earning power had peaked during World War II as they were approaching their retirement age. They, therefore, did not have enough years to build up a high wage base from which to derive a higher allotment. Some have small pensions to supplement their income. 72 percent of this population is widowed, eligible for only two-thirds of their husbands' social security grants.

The majority of this group live on incomes below the public assistance level. Approximately five percent are receiving public assistance supplementation to their Social Security allotments. A greater number might be eligible but refuse to consider filing application for welfare help because of the associated stigma, their fear of being classified as a public burden, and their resistance to having their children investigated, even though they were assured that the filial responsibility clause was no longer

valid in New York State. Those who did reveal they were receiving old age assistance pledged the social worker to secrecy. Most have savings ranging from one to several hundred dollars. This is their resource for the rainy day. They do not accept that their present situation is a rainy day but want to save funds for a future when they would "need" them. Raised in a culture whose prayers include the plea not to be forgotten in one's old age, holding onto savings for the future gives present-day living the dimension of life and contributes to an enhanced self esteem. We felt that the savings could not now be counted upon or touched in any way without damaging a delicate balance. These people felt they could not depend on Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid being a permanent, stable part of their future. They had seen too many social welfare programs whittled down. Their savings also blocked their eligibility for public assistance. Their low rentals accounted in part for their ability to manage on such minimal incomes, for having lived in rent-controlled apartments for many years, their average rental ranged from \$33. to \$55. a month.

We learned that each member had been mugged, beaten and robbed from three to seven times within the past year, and as the derelicts and addicts became more open and daring they would attack the elderly even in daylight.

Usually the attackers lurked behind stairwells waiting for their victims to return home from shopping or other activities. Any resistance on the part of the elderly resulted in broken jaws, cracked heads or being thrown down flights of stairs. Often flesh was skinned off noses and legs by knives. Many times assaults were made even when the elderly offered no resistance. As the

victims learned to hide their money on their person, those who would prey on the elderly began disrobing them, placing their hands down bosoms and up underskirts in their search for hidden money. The elderly victims would come running into the Y with blackened eyes and bruises. We noted an increasing sense of helplessness, hopelessness and depression. Attempts to get police action were ineffective as we were advised that crime was so prevalent in the area that it was impossible to police it adequately. Many times when the elderly people called the police on their own, they were told to "tell it to the mayor."

As we had expected in the initial planning for this project, housing relocation was the major request.

Initially it was hoped to develop a resource list of apartments in communities that were serviced by other Associated Ys, but this was an impossible task and required a shift in our approach. For the reality is that for New York City's 7.6 million population, there is an approximate total of 2,125,000 rental units in the five boroughs. Of these, approximately 1,359,000 are rent-controlled, 619,000 are uncontrolled (built since 1947) and approximately 153,000 are public housing units. In addition, the New York City Housing Authority leases 1,000 units in private buildings under section 23 of their leasing program.

In the year 1968, in New York City, the vacancy rate for controlled rental units was 1.05 percent and 2.06 percent for decontrolled units, with the overall vacancy rate standing at 1.23 percent. During the three-year period 1965 to 1968 there were 107,000 low-income dwelling units abandoned or demolished in the City. Of this number approximately 10,000 units were rehabilitated, thus creating a net loss of 96,886

low income dwellings in the period. (As of the date of this publication, the trend having continued, the loss figures have probably increased.)

Our attempts to meet the problem of relocating elderly persons to a stable community involved staff initiatives in exploring public housing, private housing, and the resources available through relatives of the aged persons, and it involved staff efforts directly with the elderly persons as well, chiefly to stir them to desire something more for themselves, to be willing to risk change, and where possible, or indicated, to relocate themselves.

The Jewish Family Service had previous experience with the City Housing Authority with respect to providing housing for elderly persons. Through our efforts, a liaison person was appointed from the Housing Authority to guide our applications for low-income housing for our aged population (within, of course, the Housing Authority's priorities).

We were advised that what was happening to the elderly adults in the East Tremont area was happening with almost the same severity to the Black and White, Jewish and non-Jewish, elderly persons in other locales in projects throughout the city. Since low-income public housing is usually located in depressed areas, victims of robberies and muggings get no priority. Within the New York Housing Authority's priority listing, developed to insure equity for all applications for public housing, elderly ill persons rate about 6th in importance, with people whose housing is being torn down, evicted or burned out getting first consideration. We submitted several test cases presenting severe health problems, involving cardiac conditions complicated by arthritic disorders. We were advised that cardiac involvement is accepted, but that in the

A.M.A. grading schedule, a grade four, which is tantamount to being bedridden is the only one to which the Housing Authority grants priority.

We were also advised that because of the extreme shortage of public housing, Bronx residents would not be considered for housing in preferred areas like the Coney Island section and Queens. Areas offered, such as the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, a completely non-Jewish slum area, were turned down by our elderly clients.

Middle-income Mitchell Lama Housing was investigated but the floor for income was too high for our members. The New York City program for subsidizing low-income tenants had a ceiling for rent that ruled them out.

We had been getting a lot of feedback of anger and disappointment from those who had been interviewed and who felt that the relocation program was hollow. Their expectation had been that apartments of low rental, preferably in the Pelham Parkway area in the Bronx (a neighboring but still middle-class neighborhood with minimal vacancy rate and fairly high rentals) would be available immediately following their interviews. When this was not forthcoming the members began to question the value of our initial interviews. They also reacted strongly and unfavorably towards the questionnaire which they felt was not germane to their request for location. A program of group meetings of those members interviewed was then planned. Our experience with this modality has proven it to be most effective in reaching and motivating larger numbers of clients towards a common goal and so it proved to be in serving the aged of the East Tremont area. It was through the use of a group program that we had most success in the relocation aspect of our work.

The group meetings were planned to

give the people a chance to air their anger and grievances, to get at their expectations, real and fantasied, and to keep them informed of the steps undertaken and difficulties encountered in the program. Our aim was to moderate their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and engage them to a point of assuming more responsibility for themselves.

Our group meetings began the first week of February '69 with the first 75 members who had been interviewed and had requested help in moving. Meetings were held weekly and were open-ended. The average attendance was about 45 persons. In all, 28 sessions were held from February '69 through November '69 when the project terminated. There were no group meetings scheduled the months of July and August, since most of the elderly participated in the Associated Y's camping program for the summer.

Those who remained behind continued to be seen individually. In all, 89 persons attended from 2 to 28 group sessions.

In our initial meetings they were hostile, angry at Federation, the Y, the Jewish Family Service, the author (as group leader), the City Department of Social Services, the entire world. They were riveted to the past; if only it could be undone. "If the first Jewish family hadn't moved out, the neighborhood would still be ours," succeeded by anger at those who had taken over: "look at how they run down the neighborhood and buildings." The central theme in these initial meetings was their feelings of being left out and left behind.

Many of the impossible barriers they created were economic. They could not pay more than \$50 a month rental; they refused to accept Welfare supplementation; and they would consider moving only to specific low income projects, all

of which happened to have waiting periods for apartments of from 2 to 3 years.

A recurrent theme was their not wanting to leave the East Tremont area. This despite the fact that most of the Jewish shopkeepers had left and they had to go distances to buy their kosher meat and do other shopping since the "groceries" that had sprung up in the neighborhood did not handle the food they were accustomed to. As we went into the reasons for their not wanting to move and the group members moved away from the externals to examine their own inability to leave, they continually referred to what the East Tremont area used to be, eventually airing their fantastic hope that the East Tremont area would be rehabilitated to its former "Jewish state."

These elderly persons who had remained behind in the East Tremont area had formed their own shtetel, in a sense. Never having integrated into the larger community, they remained within the pale, a separate group keeping intact their own way of life.

We might say that the East Tremont group alienated itself by remaining enclaved in their own shtetel but a culture which turns its back on the aged and allows them no meaningful social role contributes to this type of alienation.

With the flight of the younger families from old neighborhoods the aged are left exposed and isolated in neighborhoods that have disintegrated into slums. Viewed from within the frame of "loss of their community" the enclavement was a source from which they could gather strength as they identified with group values and culture.

In any association with the word, "aging," the word "loss," most frequently crops up, whether it is loss of health, peers, spouse, job, neighborhood, and so forth. In the East Tremont area,

one of the final losses they could not tolerate was the loss of the Y. It represented the continuation of a way of life that brought comfort and memories of happier years. It was an oasis, and a haven from the "pogrom" outside. At the Y you also received some solace in knowing that there are others like you willing to risk the danger of remaining in the neighborhood.

It had become clear to us for quite some time that as long as the Y remained open and available the members would not move or accept alternatives to their precarious existence. The group members recognized and verbalized their unwillingness to change as being related to their wish and hope to guarantee the Y's continuing to remain open for them. We realized that the people would need to be confronted with the certainty of the Y's closing.

A joint meeting with parents and their adult children was arranged, in part to restore some familial ties and in part too, as a collateral move to bring to their attention the imminence of the Y's closing, and to stimulate any planning for the elderly parents that was possible. In instances where there were no children, close relatives were invited. The response was gratifying.

We alerted the relatives to the Y's plans for closing and gave them a definite date. We also went into our program of service to effect safer circumstance for those who elected to remain in the community and our need for their help in locating apartments for those elderly parents who wished to move and needed assistance.

The joint meetings were really confrontations in which the children brought out that the parents were deliberately placing themselves in the precarious situation they were now in.

The children openly told of their efforts to relocate parents and their par-

ents' resistance which resulted in their separating themselves not only from their children, but from their grandchildren. They spoke of their fears for their parents' safety, as well as their fears for themselves in coming into the decayed neighborhood with grandchildren. Some told of having their cars vandalized, others have been mugged. The relatives pledged their willingness to assist the elderly financially until some more permanent arrangement for financial supplementation could be made through the Department of Social Services. While the parents showed some acceptance of their children's concern for their welfare they at the same time rejected the financial help, staying more with "Gott vet helfen."

What followed was a request by the adult children for a second joint meeting. In this second meeting the children again offered their assistance but emphasized that the parents had the responsibility to join them in their efforts to help. These meetings not only helped to re-establish links between parents, children and other relatives, but resulted in the adult children's closer contact with us for guidance in helping their parents. The children's feeling of more acceptance by their parents was affirmed when the parents began sharing with them their wanting help to move.

The focus of our group meetings then became more reality and action-oriented. For those who elected to remain in the neighborhood, a joint program with the Senior Citizens Day Center in the vicinity was made available through agreement of the East Tremont Y and the Senior Citizens Day Center.

At first our elderly group approached this resource gingerly since the day center is based in the basement of a church. But the personnel there were so warm and accepting that initial trepidation melted away. Today, the Jewish Asso-

ciation for Services to the Aged has a social worker assigned to the day center providing services for all who remain behind.

For those who expressed the wish to move, the more physically able were encouraged to go to search for apartments as a team. Among these were a taxicab driver, a retired former real estate broker, a former musician and a barber. Through these teams a number of apartments were located and offered to the group. Lists of real estate agents for the more stable areas were prepared and distributed. This helped to separate out further those who were motivated to help themselves as opposed to those who remained dependent. Within the latter group there were many physically incapable of going out to locate apartments on their own.

There were several types of responses to the possibility of moving. There were those who were interested in moving to more stable areas and were doers; those interested in remaining in the area but in better housing; those who preferred to remain where they were; those who came to meetings out of curiosity; those who were living in stable areas but who had difficulty in their relationships with landlords or the shopkeepers and wanted out; those living in low-income projects who wished to effect transfer to another and better located projects; those needing protective care; those who came ready and eager for counsel and those whom we could not reach.

Through contact with the community we were advised of approximately 10 elderly residents in the neighborhood who were said to be isolated people without any relatives. When no reply was received to any of our repeated attempts to contact them by mail or phone, home visits were planned. Our visits took us deep into the decay of the East Bronx. We walked through streets

where garbage reached our ankles. We found abandoned buildings and, in two instances, people who would not answer the doorbell even during the daytime. We left notes under the door. When we were unsuccessful in locating people on our list we would make inquiry of neighbors. Here we found a cautiousness and reluctance to give out information to white strangers on the part of the elderly Black people we approached.

I was struck by the extreme quietness that would descend whenever we entered a street block. Women leaned out of the upper story windows. It was apparent that the network had transmitted the presence of two white women in the block, ringing doorbells. We were neither approached nor were we questioned but we were observed until we left the area. In this way we reached all except one blind woman whose presence in her apartment was verified by the superintendent who also told us that she never went out or answered the bell. From information supplied by group members we were able subsequently to contact a niece who agreed to make her own arrangements for the care of her aunt.

Towards the end of this project I received notice of two low-rent public housing projects that were to include provisions for the aged. One to house 200 aged persons was located in a beautiful setting of trees and walks and surrounded by private homes. The other low-income project was part of an urban renewal plan and was surrounded by still-standing slum housing, small businesses and warehouses.

We helped a number of our people fill in preapplication forms and file them with the Housing Authority.

In the choice of the two projects, 95 percent of the group selected the second of the above projects, situated right in the heart of the slums but in an area that they were familiar with and which

had easily accessible shopping, over the quieter, more suburban project location.

The final phase of work in the East Tremont area was in organizing community support and Housing Authority acceptance to insure priority for applications of these elderly to the preferred housing project. There are now 32 members left who needed help with relocation to this low-income housing project. The majority of these elderly had lived in the area upwards of 30 years. They have limited incomes, many of them are handicapped physically, most of them have no close relatives.

In the City Housing Authority's annuals, there was some precedent for community exclusivity and priority in a similar situation in a project located in the borough of Brooklyn and we used this precedent to back up our demand.

Direct appeals were made to the City Housing Authority and their local office as well. Additionally the local Community Planning Board was persuaded to record a resolution backing a priority for these elderly people.

Our group meetings continued until the end of the year. The members who remained and needed help with relocation felt quite threatened as the project's terminal date approached and numbers dwindled. Some expressed feelings of remaining behind, trapped in the neighborhood. They were sustained by being taken to visit the projects being built, helping them fill out applications, and keeping contact with the real estate agents who would give information on vacant apartments.

Altogether out of the 134 people actively involved in the project, 64 were helped to relocate to a more stable neighborhood. Seven who needed protective care were prepared and guided to apply to homes for the aged and were admitted. Thirty-two were helped to apply for low-cost housing and are waiting to move in. Of the 31 who elected to

remain in the area and required services, careful referral was made to the proper agency for continuing care.

Recreational service is also provided through their contact with the Senior Citizens Day Care Center in the community.

There are published reports which report the great resistance of older persons to moving from an area they had lived in for most of their lives. Our work with the elderly of the East Tremont area of the Bronx certainly supported this finding.

Personnel in homes for the aged are familiar with the coined term "transplant or admission shock." So many times the aged person on admission to a home for the aged will turn his face to the wall and die. As if the diminished self-image cannot keep kindled the energies needed to adapt to a new and sometimes frightening way of life.

Older people do recognize the drain on their energies that adapting to change requires and counteract by attempting to conserve their energy output. When given alternatives in our project those who chose to move out asked for apartments in an area that they were familiar

with or where they would be with close relatives and friends so that the transitions would be easier and the chance of "transplant shock" minimized. Our work in the East Tremont area demonstrates that older adults can be motivated to move if they can relocate to familiar areas where they can still feel part of the stream of life and can be absorbed in community living.

In our group meetings we discussed the difficulty in moving from places we had lived in a long time. What came through consistently was that separating from a home and neighborhood one has lived in for 30 years or more meant not only a loss of a way of life but a partial death and was related for most part to their deeper fear of being abandoned.

At our final meeting there was a noticeable movement towards health. A party was planned at which everybody participated by bringing something they had baked or made. The attendance was tremendous and included people who had already moved out of the area. The first toast was a *l'chaim* with a pledge that everybody would remain in good health for the moving day coming in the year ahead.