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Remembering My Grandfather's Left-Wing Bungalow Colony in Dutchess County

BY RAANAN GEBERER

There's a common perception that all of the old-time Jewish bungalow colonies in New York State were in the Catskills. Maybe the majority were, but not all. Off NY State Route 9D, in Dutchess County, at the foot of a mountain, lies a large parcel of land with several modern houses on it. If you went back 50 years, during the era of my childhood, however, you would have found one medium-sized house and a group of wooden bungalows, painted white with red roofs; a swimming pool; two see-saws and a jungle gym for kids; and a social hall (called the "casino").

The bungalow colony was where my Belarusian-born maternal grandfather, Harry Rothstein, and his friends held forth every summer. I don't know its exact origin—my mother used to say that the Lebanese-American family who owned it once operated it as an actual farm, with the bungalows merely a way to make extra money. By the '50s, the farm was gone, but the bungalow colony remained.

I last visited the area about two years ago, by which time the bungalows had long been demolished. Before that, the last time I visited was in 1987. At that time, the bungalows were still there, but the paint was fading, the see-saws were rusted, and it was obvious that at least half of them were unoccupied. The writing was already on the wall.

Interestingly, when I met my wife, whose family had gone to a more conventional bungalow colony in the Catskills, she told



The author, age five, with the bungalow colony dog, "Bingie," near his grandfather's bungalow, in 1956 or 1957. Photo courtesy of Raanan Geberer.

me that my grandfather's colony must have been wealthier—although I never thought of it as such. That's because my Dutchess County bungalows had attached porches with screens, while her childhood bungalows had no porches, and only one bedroom with a kitchenette and bathroom. Come to think

of it, when my brother or I visited for more than a day, we slept on a little couch on that porch.

Many of the old folks' activities were, I suspect, similar to those in the Catskill colonies: playing pinochle, playing chess, sitting in folding chairs by the pool,



At the bungalow colony, probably in the 1950s (left to right): Yankif Gorelick (the author's uncle), Polya Gorelick (Yankif's wife), Fanny Rothstein (partially obscured, the author's grandmother), and Harry Rothstein (the author's grandfather). Photo courtesy of Raanan Geberer.

occasional entertainment at the casino (such as Yiddish folksongs or square dancing). One guy, who had a car, would go into town to get groceries, and the Dugan's Bread truck would come once a week. There was one important difference, however.

My grandfather and most of the other people there were communists, former communists, or "fellow travelers." They would hold meetings and discussion groups, often led by Grandpa himself, in which they discussed current events. Talking about the '68 election, Grandpa exclaimed, "*Vun thing ve don't want is Tom Dewey!*" He meant Richard Nixon. Another time, he said, commenting on a column in the *New York Times*: "*People are just beginning to talk about how bad Joe McCarthy was. Ve always knew!*"

Curiously, although some of these old-timers had known each other for 30 or 40 years, they always called each other "Mister": "Mr. Rosen," "Mr. Sholovsky," "Mr. Rothstein."

While Grandpa acknowledged that Stalin had been a murderous dictator and that there were serious problems with the way Jews were treated in the Soviet Union, he still defended the USSR, in general: "*Maybe dey don't have color TVs in Russia, but everybody has*

enough to eat," he said in a speech on his 75th birthday. "*All dese people like Mayor Lindsay or Bobby Kennedy, who are trying to help people under de current economic system, are OK, but it's like de're trying to bail out a rowboat vit a tin can!*"

While neither one of my parents agreed with Grandpa's politics (my mother had rebelled against his communism when she was still a teen), they basically took the whole thing with a grain of salt—as one of Grandpa's idiosyncrasies, just like his funny jokes and his comic malapropisms ("*How do you feedle?*" or "*De Armory and Navy forever!*").

Because Grandpa was so beloved by everyone, other family members also tolerated his communism as an eccentricity, a quirk. Indeed, in so many ways, like his generosity to his grandchildren (he always gave us toys), he was like a typical Jewish grandfather. The difference was that the typical Jewish grandfather didn't constantly spout phrases like "*monopoly kepitaleesm.*"

I don't know whether the family who owned the colony knew anything about the summer renters' political side, especially since Grandpa and his friends often reverted to Yiddish. I spoke to one of those family members about 10 years ago, and she made

no comments that would indicate this. She did, however, clear up one big mystery for me. Amid all the seniors, there were usually rowdy, rock music-playing teenagers filling one or two bungalows. I wondered where they came from. Now I know—they were the owner's kids' friends.

Grandpa had opposed Mom's Zionism when she was younger. By the time I was growing up, however, he was at least nominally friendly to Israel—for example, he had a book by David Ben-Gurion about the efforts to reclaim the Negev Desert through irrigation. He also had a decorative plate with stylized drawings of Israeli dancers. However, after he died, a much more hard core Marxist faction dominated the colony, and they were extremely hostile to Israel. This, mind you, was well before Begin and Sharon, before most of the settlements, before the Lebanon War, or any of the other actions that made Israel somewhat controversial.

One day, my mother told me a story she had heard from my Uncle Yankif, Grandma's brother, who had been visiting someone at the bungalow colony. One of this new crew was making a fiery speech denouncing Israel, when Yankif suddenly rose from his seat and said, "Tonight, I speak from my heart," and went into an impassioned defense of the Jewish state. As he sat down, people muttered, "I didn't know he was for Israel."

During my conversation with the member of the owner's family, she mentioned that one of the last old-timers to survive, before he died in the early '90s, stipulated in his will that his ashes be scattered over the grounds.

Rest in peace, old-time Jewish left-wing bungalow colony. ▼

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