

Article

# “Getting Along” in Parkchester: A New Era in Jewish–Irish Relations in New York City 1940–1970

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**Abstract:** The history of conflict between New York City’s Irish Americans and east European Jews dates back to the close of the 19th century. They disputed over jobs, union memberships, housing, and frequently over politics. These conflicts crescendoed exponentially in the decade or more of the Great Depression in Gaelic neighborhoods, now more than ever, the word on the street was that the Jews were taking over. The rhetoric and organizations of Michigan-based radio preacher Father Charles Coughlin gave voice and activism to local frustrations. However, in 1940, within a new neighborhood built in the Bronx that attracted a majority of Irish and a large proportion of Jews, there was no organized anti-Semitism, no outbursts of violence, or even significant complaints that more callow Jews were being roughed up in the streets or play areas. If animosities existed, negative feelings were kept within families and were not expressed in daily youthful encounters. Why life in Parkchester was so different is the conceit of this study. Its community history from 1940–1970s constituted a turning point in their previously-contested ethnic group relationship while what went on as Jews and the Irish ‘got along’ marks off the limits of conviviality of that time.

**Keywords:** Jews; Irish-Americans; African Americans; The Bronx; New York City; neighborhood; ethnic-conflict

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The history of conflict between New York City’s Irish Americans and east European Jews dates back to the close of the 19th century. They disputed over jobs, union memberships, housing, and frequently over politics. These conflicts crescendoed exponentially in the decade or more of the Great Depression. In Gaelic neighborhoods, now more than ever, the word on the street was that the Jews were taking over. The rhetoric and organizations of Michigan-based radio preacher Father Charles Coughlin gave voice and activism to local frustrations. However, in 1940, within Parkchester, a new neighborhood built in the Bronx that attracted a majority of Irish and a large proportion of Jews, there was no organized anti-Semitism, no outbursts of violence or even significant complaints that Jews were being roughed up in the streets or play areas. If animosities existed, negative feelings were kept within families and were not expressed in daily youthful encounters. Why life in Parkchester was so different is the conceit of this study. Its community history from 1940–1970s constituted a new era in a previously-contested ethnic group relationship while what went on, as Jews and the Irish ‘got along’ marks off the limits of conviviality of that time.

The long, aggravated, and sometimes violent, history of conflict between New York City’s Irish Americans and east European Jews dates back to the close of the 19th century. As competing immigrant groups, they disputed over jobs, union memberships, housing, and frequently over politics; domestic and foreign. In the area of construction work, for example, Jews, at the turn of the 20th century, complained that the Irish reserved these skilled and unskilled jobs for their own kind. Unable to get a foothold in this industry, Jewish painters, paperhangers, and carpenters undercut the Irish. They offered their services to building sub-contractors at considerably lower rates; earning the well-articulated enmity of the leaders of nascent unions. John F. Chalmers, secretary of

the Amalgamated Society and Joiners No.5, spoke for many when he complained to the New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics that “Polish Jewish scabs” willing to labor for “\$1.50–\$2.50 a day”, were forcing his union men to seek employment elsewhere. More than a decade would pass before unionized Jewish and Irish workers would agree to basically divide the work between the two ethnic groups. Irish would predominate in the new building offerings; Jews would focus on alteration work.<sup>1</sup>

A less quantifiable reaction—but surely floating in downtown’s congested and contested atmosphere—was the Irish perception that they were losing control of the streets to Jews. One nasty way of getting even was to attack pushcart peddlers on East Broadway. Such endemic animosities may have contributed largely to the infamous riot that attended the funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph in July, 1902 where allegedly Irish employees of the R. Hoe and Co. factory on Grand Street attacked the mourners with the predominantly Irish police joining in the fray.<sup>2</sup>

In the political realm, a more complicated relationship evolved. Back in the 1890s, “anti-Jewish cartoons and rhetoric were common in Tammany [Hall] publications.” However, as increasing numbers of Jews were naturalized and possessed that coveted right to vote, the all-powerful Democratic machine reached out to these potential supporters. While the highest leadership positions were reserved for fellow Irish Americans, Jewish politicians were brought to the fore in their own districts. Of course, this hegemony did not sit well with Jews of other political persuasions, especially Jews on the left who harbored a very different vision of what American society should champion.<sup>3</sup>

These conflicts crescendoed exponentially in the decade of the Great Depression where Jews suffered economically but the Irish, and for that matter many other New Yorkers, did worse. In Gaelic neighborhoods, now more than ever, the word on the street was that the Jews were taking over. One of the foci of discontent was a fundamental change in governmental appointments policies that an Italian-American mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, possessed of significant Jewish ancestral roots, fostered. Through the civil service merit system, increasingly Jewish teachers and other municipal employees—including police and fire fighters—qualified for jobs in schools, offices precinct stations and firehouses that previously had gone to the Irish through patronage. The older immigrant group and their children started to lose out. Making matters worse, the rhetoric and organizations of Michigan-based radio preacher Father Charles Coughlin gave voice and activism to local frustrations. His allegations about Jews were controlling the American economy, among other pungent canards, sat well with those who feared for their livelihoods. Determined to respond, members of Coughlin’s Christian Front, and an even more violent group called the Christian Mobilizers, applied these teachings enthusiastically to the mean street situations around them.

So in the South Bronx, for example, where Jews and the Irish lived in conflict, young men from hard-hit Irish families attacked Jews and their businesses. Some Jewish tough guys defended their people. When one Irish American offender was arrested for his misdemeanors, he no doubt spoke for others when he complained that the “Jews seem to be taking everything away. Most of the stores are owned by Jews. Practically everything is Jewish.”<sup>4</sup>

However, at the very point that Coughlin’s influence in Gotham was most profound—his church would not silence him for his virulent anti-FDR and isolationist stances until after 7 December 1941—a new neighborhood was built in the Bronx that attracted a majority of Irish and a large proportion of Jews. Other ethnic groups, most notably Italian Americans lived there too, but Hibernians and Hebrews were the most substantial. In their area of town, there was no organized anti-Semitism, no outbursts of

<sup>1</sup> (New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics 1896) 1046 noted in (Gurock 1978).

<sup>2</sup> The depiction of the riot as an Irish anti-Semitic event appears in its starkest articulation by Howard Morley Sachar (1992, pp. 274–75) who characterizes the Irish as possessed of “the proclivity to violence” and “primal brutishness.” However, Edward T. O’Donnell has argued that the employees at Hoe were not necessarily Irish and that the police routinely attacked rioters of all sorts. Most importantly, he suggests that this projection about the Irish comes from the difficulties Jews faces with them during the 1930s. See (O’Donnell 2007).

<sup>3</sup> On Tammany’s long relationship with Jews, see (Polland and Soyler 2012, pp. 178–84).

<sup>4</sup> (Bayor 1978, pp. 3–5, 25–26, 150–57).

violence or even significant complaints that Jews were being roughed up in the streets or play areas. If animosities existed, negative feelings were kept within families and were not expressed in daily youthful encounters. In the same borough of high voltage tensions, the two groups lived harmoniously together for more than a generation. The children of the original settlers would move out in large numbers in the 1970s when they reached their majorities and departed. Arguably, these young adults took with them tolerant, if not positive, feelings about how Jews and the Irish might live alongside one another into subsequent neighborhoods and into personal relations both within and without Gotham. As such, this signal aspect of Parkchester's community history from 1940–1970s constituted a new era in their previously-contested ethnic group relationship even as what went on in this area as Jews and the Irish 'got along' well marks off the limits of conviviality of that time; offering an appreciation how close their friendships might be.

In March, 1940, Parkchester opened its wide expanse of 171 residential buildings across 129 of acres land that would include well-positioned parks, with hundreds of trees and thousands of flowers, recreational areas and a designated shopping street set up for working and middle class people anxious to relocate into a new area of the city. A planned community, this remarkable initiative of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Corporation (MLIC), was designed to be—in its owners' own words and in the popular mind—as “A City within a City”. One of its founders went even further and projected the neighborhood as a reasonable alternative to incipient suburban enclaves; which would become a fundamental fact of American life after World War II. A decade after the community was up and running, real estate mogul and political insider Robert W. Dowling spoke strikingly about the warranted possibilities of an alternative “horizontal” community ideal for “middle class” families “to bring up children”; preferable to the “vertical” Long Island, New Jersey, or Westchester. Dowling did not mention in his tribute to staying in a dynamic city the commutation dilemmas breadwinners would face in the suburbs; a future bane of those migrants' existence.<sup>5</sup>

MLIC officials were very selective in their admissions protocols as literally thousands, if not tens of thousands, of New Yorkers and hopeful folks from other places in America wanted to reside in modern one and two bedroom apartments—there were also a few 3 bedroom suites—ideal for young families. A point of emphasis for the company was that it did not want people who were either too affluent or impoverished. Although he did not specify financial numbers, in a 1938 radio interview, MLIC chairman Frederick Ecker set out that he was seeking to house families “whose income are not so low that they cannot afford anything except the dingiest tenements, and yet not high enough to enable them to pay the relatively high rentals demanded for decent and comfortable apartments.”<sup>6</sup>

Not only did the company want families of the right socio-economic class, but also they were intent on folks possessed of what we might call today refined ‘family values’. The critical moment for applicants was the moment when the MLIC's intensive vetting system brought a so-called “social worker” to a family's prior apartment. This white-gloved official, it was said, asked “intimate and penetrating” questions whether the family was “neat and self-respecting or careless and uncouth. Decent and quiet folk, or likely to be loud and cantankerous neighbors.” Bank accounts and references were also closely checked. Some Jews believed that Catholics received preferential treatment though there is no compelling evidence of any established quota system that stymied Jewish residential entry elsewhere. What might be said—since it is part of Parkchester lore—is that if a priest from either the local St. Helena's or St. Raymond's parishes put in a request for an apartment for the relatives of a fellow Catholic clergyman or nun, these aspirants almost miraculously jumped up the long waiting list. However, it is certain that at least one Catholic family did not feel so favored. According to John Graham, there were no “monster children” in their Beach Avenue apartment situated only a few blocks from the new development. The problem was with his dad's occupation. As a subway conductor,

<sup>5</sup> (Stanton 1941; Beigel 1941; New York Times 1945).

<sup>6</sup> The text of the 15 April 1938 radio interview, Pall Mall Broadcast-Dorothy Thompson, “People in the News” is in the MLIC archive in Long Island City.

he did not earn enough to qualify. This turndown was seemingly an arbitrary one since so many transit authority employees did make the cut. Decades later, when Msgr. John Graham was called to the pulpit of St. Raymond's, he frequently would quip in introductory remarks to locals: "I finally made it to Parkchester."<sup>7</sup>

To insure that the fortunate ones would follow the rules once ensconced in Parkchester, tenants were required to sign a lease that contained more than a score of regulations; rules that prohibited dogs, leaving personal items outside their apartments, sitting on beach chairs outside of the building or as Covenant #20 stated no "noisy, dangerous and destructive acts, abuse and damage to the landlord's property, unbearable annoyance to other tenants, unsanitary parties, disregard of development or governmental regulations." Additionally, the management demanded that parents make sure that their children not step out of line. A uniformed, if unarmed, private police force, the so-called "Parkchester cops", patrolled the neighborhood and handed out tickets to offending youngsters. Enough violations would lead to strong reprimands from the MLIC and in some cases, attempts to evict problem tenant families; moves that in the late 1940s, tenant organizations fought vigorously.

For example, as of 1944, the 'dossier' on seven year old Robert Simmons Jr. that his parents told the *New York Herald Tribune* "rivalled police records" included the following misdeeds:

November 1, 1942, Robert caught on a lawn.

February 1, 1943, Robert apprehended throwing a snowball.

June 24, 1943, Robert trampled shrubbery retrieving his ball.

October 10, 1943, Robert picked a flower in one of the development's gardens.<sup>8</sup>

While the MLIC did much to tell its residents how they were supposed to live, even more critically, the company also had a say in how tenants of varying backgrounds might interact with one another through situating them indiscriminately in their large expanse. This sort of implicit social engineering was publicly noted at the very outset of neighborhood history in the manner in which the landlord populated its buildings. Then, reportedly, the "Akuskas, the Abbotts, the Breslaus, the Devores, the Gershowitzes and the McCahans" all found their places in the new residential complex. Any New York could identify the range of ethnicities enumerated. These sorts of placements augured to break down cultural and social barriers that had characterized the old sections of the borough and the city and still were regnant in other locales. Indeed, in distributing randomly its Irish, Jews, Greeks, Germans, Italians, and all of the other 12,000 families, whatever their ancestry, Parkchester, it can be said, "upset New York's old pattern of neighborhoods dominated by people of similar national backgrounds." Actually, by virtue of the MLIC policies that were blind to differences in religion and national origin, this Bronx community was more ethnically diversified not only than almost any other place in the city but even more integrated than many suburban locales under construction.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, elsewhere in Gotham in the 1940s and beyond, well into the post-war years, residential "mobility did not necessarily initiate the immediate erosion of . . . ethnic communities." In other words, in other neighborhoods, Irish and Jewish families and members of other ethnic groups availed themselves of new housing opportunities without fundamentally compromising the largely self-imposed residential

<sup>7</sup> (Markey 1940) See also (Smith 1945). For a Catholic priest's sense that his clergy's families had received preferential treatment during the administration of a predecessor, see interview with Msgr. Thomas Derivan, 24 January 2017. For example of a Jewish perception that the Catholics were treated better than they were see Douglas Lowe to Charles Rubinstein, November 18, 1958 published in *Kovetz Morshet Avinu* (New York: n.p., 2005): 86. In this case the lay leaders of the Young Israel of Parkchester (YIP), one of the neighborhood's two synagogues, were perturbed that their newly-appointed rabbi was not provided an apartment immediately. For the problems the Graham family faced, see interview with Msgr. John Graham, October 30, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> See an undated sample lease, circa 1950s with its more than a score of regulations in the Bronx Historical Society Library; (New York Herald Tribune 1944).

<sup>9</sup> On the different ethnic names of people drawn to Parkchester, see (Stanton 1941, p. 27). On older ethnic segregation in New York housing, and how Parkchester was different see Farrell, William H. 1949. Projects Become Home, Sweet Home. *New York Times*, June 21.

and social segregation that had sustained ethnic neighborhoods in the first half of the century. However, such clearly was not the Parkchester reality within the metropolis. Meanwhile, out in places like Levittown, Long Island or its sister community in Pennsylvania; iconic suburban locales that would arise after 1945, families chose what spot in the sub-divisions would be ideal for them. Some gentiles were not happy living among Jews; creating in its wake a Jewish section of town, and some Jews “felt themselves out of place among their neighbors.” Not so in an apartment environment where occupants could not, in any way, select their next-door neighbors. Where Parkchester resembled life in suburbia in the best of ways was the commitment of its people to “get along with others”, a sensibility that was palpable in these East Bronx streets. From its very start, residents were “terribly eager to be ‘nice,’ even if they [were] not so already- to live the amiable, conformist existence of the suburbs, to know their neighbors for a change.” As economic conditions improved, lightening families’ loads, their senses were that “they have moved up in the world by finding such a grand place to live.”<sup>10</sup>

For religious leaders of the Jewish minority, the MLIC’s system was an issue to be addressed when they contemplated the dilemma of the next generation maintaining an interest in their group identity. One of the problems was that there was no “Jewish street” replete with their identifiable Yiddish or Hebrew commercial signage or ethnic foods; places where people might buy and sell and informally congregate with their own kind. An organic sense of Jewishness did not radiate from the streets. In the entrepreneurial and culinary culture area, day to day life was different from the iconic Jewish neighborhood like the Grand Concourse or even in those East Bronx areas that preceded the building of Parkchester. Largely, when Jews went to shop or eat, they did so at the same places as did their Gentile neighbors. If anything, most Jewish Parkchesterites would not have wanted it any other way. They had chosen, and had passed the test, to reside in a diverse neighborhood and did not want to be singled out. However, assimilation was a minor concern for most Jewish lay people in Parkchester. As a collateral plus for Jews, desirous of fitting in, the absence of their own well-known turf area may have served as a deterrent to potential troublemakers.<sup>11</sup>

One striking evidence that groups like the Christian Front or the inciting rhetoric of Coughlin or his successors did not find followers or many listeners in Parkchester is readily apparent through what did, and did not, happen around a criminal incident in the neighborhood that received coverage in the *New York Times*. In March 1944, a Mrs. Minnie Levine—clearly possessed of an identifiable Jewish surname—was arrested for wartime price gouging and thus conceivably could have been a ready target for an anti-Jewish canard. However, her actions did not stir anti-Semitic reactions. No mention was made in the media of critics pointing to her apparent religious background. In her defense, Levine alleged that she could not read English and thus was unaware of the regulations of the Office of Price Administration (OPA). Seemingly, her native tongue was Yiddish, but that ready point of identification was not publicly noted. Unquestionably, that Lorraine Helfond—also possibly a Jew—was noted as instrumental in hauling Levine into court may have helped stop any anti-Semitic insinuations. Even more significant, Helfond took off after this miscreant as a leader of the United Victory Committee whose stalwarts had surnames like Johannes, Ferraro, Sosis and Elkin, not to mention Lehman and Kozerwitz.<sup>12</sup> Ever the community activist, to ensure that justice be done, Helfond was in the hearing room when she told a reporter that “the other women were busy caring for their children but that they would have their ‘Victory Over the Black Market’ parade within a few days.” The purpose of the

<sup>10</sup> On the persistence of defined ethnic neighborhoods in postwar New York—but not Parkchester—see (Zeitiz 2007, pp. 15–17). On suburban neighborhoods clustering with sensitivity towards with which different groups would live, see (Gans 1967, p. 49). See also, (Gordon 1959). On references to Parkchester life evoking a suburban social-neighborly life style, see (Markey 1940, p. 44).

<sup>11</sup> Rivka Horowitz email to Gurock, July 23, 2017. On Jewish businesses denoting post-war Jewish presence on the Grand Concourse, see (Gurock 2012). On the concerns of a leader of the Young Israel of Parkchester over the disinterest of fellow Jews in religious life, see Jack Slove to Members (June 24, 1942) (Young Israel of Parkchester Papers, Yeshiva University Archive (YIPP)).

<sup>12</sup> For a listing of the names of leaders of these war time organizations from different backgrounds, see, for example *Bronx Home News* (Bronx Home News 1944): 5; (Bronx Home News 1944): 5; (Bronx Home News 1944): 4.

neighborhood demonstration was to bring together “crusading housewives” carrying placards, was to demonstrate “to other shopkeepers—against several of whom the committee has already filed charges with the OPA that ‘it does not pay to chisel in war time’.”<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in more positive veins, neighborhood people of all backgrounds showed signs of this get-along spirit when they came together in work and prayer within the American Women’s Volunteer Service and the Bronx Unit of W.I.V.E.S., “an organization of the spouses of men in the armed forces.” Among men, the 1500 volunteers of all backgrounds who served as air wardens also helped create a sense of shared opinion and community commitment as they were stationed on guard in the buildings where they lived. They too paraded through the streets to demonstrate the array of emergency equipment available in case of a catastrophe on the home front. When there was a blackout drill, they were the ones to roam through the houses to make sure everyone was on board.<sup>14</sup>

In 1944, those women and men who had devoted “an outstanding number of hours in volunteer” work were honored at a community-wide luncheon where proud attendees heard local clergy Rev. Wayne White and Rabbi Nathan Lublin of Temple Emanuel of Parkchester emphasize the goals of “brotherhood and community harmony”; values that the Christians and Jews who labored together evidently shared. Not surprisingly, this minister and rabbi joined hands with a score of other religious and political leaders in a prayer service that the Parkchester Citizens Council organized to mourn FDR on a Sunday after the president’s death in April, 1945.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly helping out in the war effort on this home front played a bonding role for groups of all backgrounds. When the Japanese surrender brought an end to hostilities, all Parkchesterites celebrated with a block party that packed “the sidewalks and streets with people”. However, among Parkchester’s Jews, the realities of what had befallen their brethren in Nazi-occupied territories tempered their pride and happiness as victorious Americans. While the newsletter of the Young Israel of Parkchester (YIP) was sure to note that “over 1,300,000 Jews fought in the armies of the United Nations”, it also reported in the same shortened breath “four million Jews were murdered in Europe during the Nazi siege.” Noteworthy here is that six months after V-E Day, synagogue scribes—like so many American Jews and gentiles—were not fully aware of the actual statistical dimensions of the 6,000,000 Jews murdered during the Holocaust.<sup>16</sup>

This shared patriotism surely played its role in engendering positive inter-group relations. Indeed, notwithstanding deep concerns about the fate of loved ones under arms among the Allies and having to deal personally with rationing back home, World War II was a good time for Americans—a time that tempered negative feelings—but, there was more to this neighborhood’s positive atmospherics. Parkchesterites got along from the very start because Jews, the Irish, and other Christians were both coming together into a fresh, new neighborhood. What happened in the East Bronx resembled what would take place concomitantly, and later on, in suburban start-up communities. There was no sense of one group invading the others’ turf; that evident animosity that the Irish often harbored against Jews that had stoked conflict in earlier inter-ethnic conflicts. If anything, given the MLIC’s vetting procedures, both groups may have well felt fortunate to be chosen people, selected to live in the area.

<sup>13</sup> ([New York Times 1944](#)). On Helfond’s involvement with both groups see ([Bronx Home News 1944](#)).

<sup>14</sup> On the activities of the United Victory Committee and the involvement of the YIP, see United Victory Committee of Parkchester to Young Israel of Parkchester (16 April 1942) and Jack Slove to Members (24 June 1942). See also flyer dated 28 March 1942 calling on YIP members to attend a Victory Committee dance. The flyer is within the YIPP.

<sup>15</sup> On the range of activities conducted just in the month of March, 1944, see “AWVS Brotherhood Lunch”, [Bronx Home News \(Bronx Home News 1944\)](#): 5; “AWVS Makes Survey of Child Care Needs”, [Bronx Home News \(Bronx Home News 1944\)](#): 8; “St. Patrick’s Day Marked by AWVS Business Girls”, [Bronx Home News \(Bronx Home News 1944\)](#): 5; “More than 500 at AWVS Dance: Part of Proceeds Will Go to Mobile Kitchen”, [Bronx Home News \(May 10, 1942\)](#): 9; “Advanced First Aid Training is Planned by Local AWVS”, [Bronx Home News \(May 17, 1942\)](#): 9; “Services for Roosevelt to be Held in Parkchester”, [Bronx Home News \(May 4, 1945\)](#): 9. See also from May, 1945, “Parkchester Women See Movie of Aid to Veterans”, [Bronx Home News \(May 23, 1945\)](#): 3.

<sup>16</sup> On celebration after V-J day, see ([Krista 2008](#)); on the YIP report of Jews in the military and the inaccurate number of Jews victimized, see the [Young Israelite](#), December 1945: 6.

In addition, a structural omission in construction protocols that would plague Parkchester for generations brought those on the same floor together. In the 1940s, air conditioning was not available in almost all residential areas, the new neighborhood included. In coping with the stifling overheating in their apartments during summer time, an open-door policy evolved among residents. To increase cross ventilation from the all-important floor fans, neighbors, without any directives from management, determined building-by-building to keep their apartment doors open around the clock. Without any grand statements about cooperation, tenants simply assisted each other in making life more comfortable for those on their floor during heat waves. Civility prevailed on an ongoing basis as Jews became used to living without tension with “Christian neighbors”—as one Jewish woman who moved in with her husband and family the day Parkchester opened referred to those living next door. It was a profound change in attitudes between ethnic group members, even if in the end Jews and Gentiles counted their own kinds as their closest friends. Indeed, sometimes “floor parties” evolved out of budding inter-group relationships. Once families got to know one another, stay at home moms occasionally took the subways down to Broadway for an evening show, leaving their husbands to mind the youngsters.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps more than any other factor, it was the Parkchester’s men’s work experience, at a time when most women in the community stayed at home, that did the most to keep groups from fighting each other. In a post-war era of prosperity, this neighborhood’s Jews and Irish were both doing well economically. The pressures of unemployment of the Depression era were past and without it there was a decline in competition and jealousies among a new generation of New Yorkers. Indeed, Parkchester’s men, especially its army of civil servants; which was the foremost job description of Parkchester’s early residents, worked at the same sorts of jobs and rode the fast and inexpensive subways together on their way to offices in Manhattan; the place that was called: ‘the city’.

By the numbers, in July 1940, it was reported statistically that “among the first families” were 220 police and fire fighters. We may assume that the occupational breakdown was primarily of male workers. An additional 73 families—men and women were in the teaching profession—and 295 were in the employ of the post office and other federal services.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, a number of Catholic religious leaders who were implicitly and explicitly connected to the new neighborhood were committed to brotherhood. Indeed, their attitudes constituted an anti-Coughlin position within their church in Gotham. When Parkchester opened, a Catholic chain migration took place out of the Mott Haven section of the Bronx; still a hot bed of Christian Front activities. That area in a troubled borough was also the home of St. Jerome’s parish whose pastor Father, F.C. Campbell, excoriated ant-Semitism and became involved in inter-faith work. It is not known how many of his erstwhile congregants who moved to the East Bronx new neighborhood bought into his message of tolerance. But if they had attended services, they undoubtedly heard his unqualified teachings. What is certain that a central figure within Parkchester Catholicism Msgr. Arthur Scanlan would follow Campbell’s lead as a force for religious conviviality.<sup>19</sup>

Room for religious institutions was not part of the MLIC master plan. It was left to the Christians and Jews to determine if they wanted houses of worship to ring the neighborhood or to be content to pray in churches or synagogues blocks away that had been in existence prior to their arrival. For a variety of reasons, both groups wanted to start anew. Benedict Avenue due south of Parkchester quickly became known as one of two “inter-faith rows” that emerged to serve the religiously devoted.

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<sup>17</sup> On neighbors opening doors during summertime, see “Once upon a Time in the Bronx”, New York One television interview with Irene Horowitz, August 22, 2010. See also (Krista 2008, p. 3); interview with Msgr. Derivan and interview with Peter Carolan, January 24, 2017; Interview with John B. McNerney interview 123 conducted by the Bronx Institute Oral History Project Lehman College, November 1, 1982. See also (Krista 2008, p. 3).

<sup>18</sup> For the statistical breakdown, see (New York Herald Tribune 1940). Several other sources provided by the MLIC identify the same type of occupational distribution without assigning numbers to the categories. See, for example, (The Home Office 1940a; The Home Office 1940b).

<sup>19</sup> (Bayor 1978, p. 161).

The other locale that was the site of a church and synagogue down the block from one another was on Virginia Avenue; a block west of the new development. However, Temple Emanuel of Parkchester may well have not come into existence if 1942 down the street from both St. Helena's and Parkchester's Baptist Church on Benedict Avenue without Msgr. Scalan's intercession. His parish's historical lore has it that the priest bought the property from an owner who would not sell to Jews and then re-sold the large corner lot to Emanuel.<sup>20</sup>

In 1949, the Catholic church and the Conservative synagogue had that new neighbor, the Parkchester Baptist Church. As far as its location was concerned, the Building Committee of the Baptist Church said "with a Jewish temple on the left and a Roman Catholic Church on the right, we felt there would be no harm in having a Baptist Church in the middle. We will work for peace and harmony with them all." At that point, a local newspaper noted appreciatively on how "an interdependence of all of our people . . . contributes to a good, stable community."<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, ecumenism was alive and well throughout the first decades of Parkchester's existence. Spiritual leaders of the churches and the Conservative Jewish Temple Emanuel often exchanged pulpits on Thanksgiving and other holidays that the groups observed in common on a rotating basis; a practice that the local press praised. Later on its history, Emanuel would conduct a Passover Seder with St. Helena's. The Orthodox synagogue, the YIP, in keeping with its Orthodox Jewish religious strictures did not offer its rostrum to Christian groups, nor did its leaders speak in a church. But annually, its rabbi lit Hanukkah candles in a menorah that was placed in the middle of Metropolitan Oval; Parkchester's central gathering place next to Christmas stockings hung over a faux fireplace.<sup>22</sup>

However, while religious leaders spoke about tolerance and the Jewish minority could speak appreciatively of their "Christian neighbors" during this time and place—the first decades after World War II—there was an edge to the friendliness that limited the closest of relationships in this 'get-along' environment. Such were the realities of that time in America. Here, Parkchester resembled another suburban sensibility of the era; the reality that at the end of the day even in uncontested environments, Jews and Christians preferred to stick with their own kind in informal settings. In other words, out in the "Levittowns", of the United States, all groups might join together in working to build a better fire station; but when the common labors were completed, when deciding with whom they would most like to see when they had free time, generally people liked their fellow ethnics or co-religionists the most. Such limitations and considerations likewise were true in the Bronx's "City in a City". Or as one veteran Irish American writer who grew up in the neighborhood put it so well: "we lived separately together. I had no Jewish friends . . . and no acquaintances with Jewish girls" but at the same time there were no so-called "Irish pogromists" whom Jews feared in other neighborhoods."<sup>23</sup>

The foremost testing ground for the depth of Parkchester's inter-group friendships was its playground areas where boys, especially, of all religious backgrounds met up after school and on weekends. Daily from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., a majority of Catholic youngsters who went to parochial school and almost all Jews who were public school pupils did not see each other. But when the bell rang, so many kids frequented recreational areas where they ordinarily played pick-up games with or against one another. Hard fouls might lead to fights but rarely did athletic battles lead to "Christ-killer" canards. Generally, players got along; and there weren't members of street gangs standing in the sidelines or patrolling the street corners at the ready to pounce on Jewish youngsters. The unadmired Parkchester cops and the better-liked recreational directors had their say even if a bully might throw

<sup>20</sup> On the founding of Temple Emanuel, see ([New York Times 1941](#)); On the lore that Msgr. Scalan interceded to make the synagogue building possible, see interview with Msgr. Derivan.

<sup>21</sup> The year for the founding of the Parkchester Baptist Church was derived from a look at its cornerstone. See also on the founding of that church, "New Parkchester Church is Begun" an undated article that appears to be from 1949 in the MLIC archive. See also on the ground-breaking, *Bronx Press Review*, September 22, 1949: 2. For the term "Interfaith Row", see ([New York Times 1949](#)).

<sup>22</sup> On exchange of pulpits and candle lighting, see, for example, ([Bronx Press Review 1963, 1966a, 1966b](#)).

<sup>23</sup> ([Ringer 1969](#); [Quinn 2017](#)); Author Peter Quinn blog wordpress.com.



a Spaldeen ball over a garage roof that abutted one of the designated play areas just to be nasty. At the same time, when darkness fell, temporary teammates went their separate ways. Indeed, even in the case of an outstanding Jewish ballplayer, who was proficient enough to suit up for a formal Catholic team, when the final buzzer sounded, he hung out with his close friends who were likewise Jewish. Reportedly, Catholic and Jewish boys did not date each others' sisters; another break on enduring friendships. Such inter-faith relationships would await subsequent generations.<sup>24</sup>

There was, however, one additional aspect of Parkchester's community life from the 1940s to the 1970s that its children, and for that matter its adults, shared. Until the very close of this early-post war period, they resided in an almost totally segregated neighborhood. African Americans were not seen in the playground or on the streets and stores.

The MLIC's social engineering went only so far as the company simply kept up with the tenor of the times where in this city and country racial segregation was for the longest duration the law of the city and of the land. Even after legislation was passed outlawing discrimination, persistent offenders found a myriad of ways of circumventing the regulations. While through its close-to-30 year control of Parkchester, the MLIC never admitted that it systematically kept African Americans out of its apartments, management used a variety of techniques of affirming Ecker's assertion that he articulated at the very beginning of the neighborhood's history that "Negroes and whites don't mix."<sup>25</sup> Until 1954, prior to the landmark *Brown vs. Board of education of Topeka, KS* desegregation decision, the MLIC had the courts on its side. Indeed, in 1953, when a group of politically-radical Jewish tenants attempted to desegregate their community through sub-letting their apartments to a black family in violation of one of the many lease covenants, the court sided with the company and the tenants and their black compatriots were evicted.<sup>26</sup> In subsequent years, tried and untrue methods to maintain the racial status quo were kept in play. The most common refrain was that the company was agreeable to desegregation but that blacks would have to wait their turn and they almost never got off that legendarily voluminous waiting list. Meanwhile, whites with the right family or religious connections and clearly the right complexions often jumped the line. It was only in 1968, when the New York State Human Rights Commission threatened not only fines but jail time for recalcitrant MLIC officials that more than just a minimum of minority applicants entered the community. Even then, it took a while for the word to come down from the home office to the operatives on the ground in the East Bronx.<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, when African Americans finally gained their leases in Parkchester, their presence was met with only a minimum of resistance from the white population. While some of the first blacks in the neighborhood had to deal with instances of troubling unpleasantness from other tenants—like elevator doors slammed in their faces—there was no organized opposition to their presence in the area. The tactics that the Urban League and the NAACP used to force the hand of the MLIC, that focused on using legislation and court decisions to open doors for them, played a substantial role in an uncommonly calm transition. There were no street demonstrations or other public protests that might have raised white resident consciousness or trepidations.<sup>28</sup>

Even more importantly, the minorities that moved in to Parkchester were on the whole solid working and lower middle class folks; occupationally much like the original tenants in the neighborhood. Many of these minority group newcomers had fled from declining areas of the Bronx

<sup>24</sup> On athletic meetings between Jews and Irish in the 1950s–1960s, see interviews with Carolan, McInerney, and Dr. Robert Krain, October 9, 2017. See also *The Gift of friendship. Amit Magazine*, Fall 2017: on-line edition.

<sup>25</sup> On the MLIC's frequent assertion that it did not discriminate, see ([Bronx Press Review 1964](#)). On Ecker's statement see the 20 May 1943 edition of the *New York Post* discussed in ([Capeci 1978](#)). For an African American's attempt to convince Ecker to open up the neighborhood, see ([Allen 1971](#)).

<sup>26</sup> For accounts of this early unsuccessful fight for integration see, for example. *New York Amsterdam News*, 1953. Pickets Stage Demonstration at Parkchester. *New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, p. 5. *New York Times*. 1953. Women in Chains Protest Eviction. *New York Times*, May 20, p. 32. For a MLIC account of their legal actions see ([Rodgers 1954](#), p. 679).

<sup>27</sup> ([Fried 1968](#); [Bronx Press Review 1968](#)).

<sup>28</sup> For an example of subtle, non-confrontational civil rights activity, see Instructions for Homeseekers and Checkers, circa 1966, Papers of Operation Open City, Urban League of Grater New York on file at the Schomburg Library.

and Brooklyn and shared many of those vaunted, common family values with Parkchester's white people. Indeed, in some cases, upstanding African Americans were concerned that the neighborhood they moved into not become overwhelmingly black; in which case they would consider moving out too. They also wanted an integrated neighborhood.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, what the Parkchester story tells us, whether it speaks of the Irish and the Jews in the 1940s–1960s or whites and blacks in the era that followed, commonalities in economic and social class among groups and a mutual feeling that they were all living in a special place worth preserving can trump racial and religious animosities of the past. This atmosphere created its own get-along attitude that the children of Parkchester's first generation took with them to suburbia or to other upscale neighborhoods in Gotham when the professional sons and daughters of police, fire fighters, and post office employees gained the economic wherewithal to seek even more salubrious settings wherein to raise their own children.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On the economic and social typologies of the minorities who moved into Parkchester in the 1970s, see (Dullea 1973; Siegal 1974).

<sup>30</sup> On the economic mobility of the second generation of white Parkchesterites and their out-migration see (Bronx Press Review 1965; Blumenthal 1971).

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