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Battle in Black and White

By AMY FOX
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WHEN I was a kid, we visited my grandparents in Stuyvesant Town nearly every year. The apartment where my mother had grown up was filled with towers of books and foreign treasures, including a Torah scroll rescued from the Holocaust. I used to fall asleep on a sagging cot listening to footsteps and voices passing underneath my window, something impossible in the quiet Boulder, Colo., neighborhood where I lived. When I dreamed of city life, I saw those red brick structures, the tiled kitchen where my grandmother made meatloaf, the paved circle where we used to wait for my grandfather to pull up in his powder-blue Dodge Dart.

It was hard to imagine my respectable grandma, Diana Miller, her waist-length hair piled on top of her head, or my grandpa, Leo, with his dignified vests, barricading themselves in those same buildings to avoid being put out on the street. But that is what happened in the winter of 1952, when my grandparents were among those white tenants who stood at the forefront of the battle to integrate the housing complex where they lived.

Walking through the brick towers and grassy lawns of Stuyvesant Town three years ago, I stopped in the center of the complex to photograph a plaque, dated 1947, honoring Stuyvesant Town's creator, Frederick Ecker, who "with the vision of experience and the energy of youth conceived and brought into being this project, and others like it, that families of moderate means might live in health, comfort and dignity in parklike communities, and that a pattern might be set of private enterprise productively devoted to public service."

My grandfather had photographed the same plaque 50 years earlier. But neither of us could take its words too seriously. We both knew that for a family to be offered "health, comfort and dignity," the family had to be white.

My grandparents were among 200,000 applicants for the new residential project built in 1947 on the far East Side of Manhattan to offer World War II veterans affordable housing at a monthly rent of \$14 to \$17 a room. Five years later, they were among 35 families who were nearly evicted from their apartments after fighting their landlord -- Metropolitan Life Insurance -- over its official policy of rejecting the applications of black veterans. When my grandparents managed to renew their lease, they proudly hung their pale green eviction notice on the wall, with a tiny slip of paper in a corner of the frame bearing the words: "Without Struggle There Is No Progress -- Frederick Douglass."

The eviction notice impressed me. Many of my friends were embarrassed by their grandparents' racist attitudes, and I was pleased that mine had fought for civil rights. Unfortunately, I was more proud than curious. I never asked for the whole story, and a few years ago, when I began working on a screenplay about the events, my grandparents were no longer alive.

I was left with my mother's spotty memories of events that happened when she was 5. She remembers walking to school with a black child whose family had moved into Stuyvesant Town. She remembers her father joining other former servicemen standing guard outside the black family's door, ready if necessary to defend the apartment against the landlord.

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She remembers that when the situation got ugly, she and her baby brother, named Frederick Douglass Miller, in honor of the great abolitionist leader, were sent to their aunt's house on Long Island.

In the cavernous reading room at the New York Public Library, I began slowly filling in the gaps. I learned that my grandparents had been members of the Tenants Committee to End Discrimination in Stuyvesant Town, a grass-roots organization formed in 1948. Stuyvesant Town and the adjacent Peter Cooper Village had been built as part of an ambitious slum-clearance project in which bulldozers tore through 18 blocks south of East 23rd Street to create a solution to the city's postwar housing shortage. But MetLife refused to consider the applications of three black veterans who sought apartments. When these veterans sued the company, a group of Stuyvesant Town residents, including my grandparents, united to support their cause.

Frederick Ecker, chairman of Metropolitan Life Insurance, maintained that as a private landlord, he had the right to define his own criteria for selecting tenants. But although Stuyvesant Town was owned by a private corporation, the city had given MetLife significant tax breaks and financial support. Thus black New Yorkers were paying taxes to support a housing complex they were not allowed to live in.

In public statements, Mr. Ecker described his motives as economic; he said he feared that integrating the complex would lower its value and its appeal to investors. He also said that black applicants could live in Riverton, a MetLife housing complex a few miles to the north on the Harlem River Drive. But Riverton was hardly Stuyvesant Town. While MetLife advertised Stuyvesant Town, with nearly 9,000 apartments, as a "suburb in the city," James Baldwin, writing about Riverton a decade later, called Harlem's housing projects as "cheerless as a prison." In *Esquire* in 1960, he wrote that blacks hated Riverton "long before the builders arrived."

"They began hating it," he wrote, "at about the time people began moving out of their condemned houses to make room for this additional proof of how thoroughly the white world despised them."

The Stuyvesant Town tenants committee, with 1,800 members, was made up of the families of veterans who believed that after fighting a war for justice overseas, they could not ignore injustice at home. "The courage and sharpshooting of a Negro machine gunner saved my life with a dozen other white G.I.'s," my grandfather had written in a pamphlet issued by the committee. "Can any one of us say he can't be my neighbor? I can't." Surveys of residents conducted by the tenants committee showed that two-thirds of Stuyvesant Town's 25,000 tenants opposed MetLife's exclusionary policy.

In August 1949, the committee invited a black family, the Hendrixes, to move from their overpriced, rat-infested apartment in Harlem into the Stuyvesant Town apartment of Jesse Kessler while Mr. Kessler was on vacation. When he returned, the Hendrixes were moved to another Stuyvesant Town apartment, this one the home of Lee Lorch, a vice chairman of the tenants committee and a mathematics professor who was leaving the city to accept a teaching position at Pennsylvania State College.

The previous April, Dr. Lorch had been abruptly dismissed, without explanation, from his job at City College of New York, and many colleagues, neighbors and journalists believed that the firing was linked to his leadership on the tenants committee.

Hardine Hendrix, an art student who worked by day in a warehouse, along with his wife, Raphael, and their 6-year-old son, Hardine Jr., stayed in these apartments as guests. The young couple did not pay the \$76 monthly rent because it was illegal for Stuyvesant Town tenants to sublet. Although the Hendrixes encountered hostile remarks and threatening telephone calls from some neighbors, others were welcoming; one woman apparently introduced them to gefilte fish.

A Landlord Versus the People

While my mother and Hardine Jr. were traipsing through the 12 Stuyvesant Town playgrounds, the battle continued to play out in the courtroom. The black veterans suing MetLife were backed by 29 civic organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union. But Justice Felix C. Bevens of the New York Supreme Court ruled for MetLife, remarking that "housing accommodation is not a recognized civil right." Appeals did not succeed, and in June 1950, the United States Supreme Court declined to review the case.

The controversy also spilled into City Hall. Councilmen Ben Davis and Stanley Isaacs introduced a bill that would make discrimination on the basis of race illegal in housing projects financially supported by the city. The bill, which would have applied retroactively, was intended to take aim at Stuyvesant Town.

Working behind the scenes, Mayor William O'Dwyer tried to delay action on the legislation, offering instead to facilitate direct negotiations with Mr. Ecker. But although MetLife eventually offered to admit a few token black families, the company refused to change its tenant selection policy. The company also informed 35 families who belonged to the tenants committee, my grandparents among them, that their leases would not be renewed. Dr. Lorch's 6-year-old daughter, Alice, even received an individual notice with her name on it.

Nineteen of the families decided to fight to keep their apartments. They printed a flier whose cover bore the words "a landlord vs. the people" over a black-and-white photograph of the 19; the picture showed my grandfather with his arm around my mother, Betty, a child standing proudly in her short plaid coat. "For the first time in American history," the flier proclaimed, "a landlord has tried to evict citizens from their homes for their social beliefs."

My grandfather kept the flier, along with a typewritten "list of evictees" compiled by the tenants committee. The names of couples are listed with their addresses, and next to each one, my grandfather had scrawled the words "stay" or "go." Next to his own name, he had written the word "stay."

The city marshal ordered the targeted tenants to be out of their apartments by 9 o'clock on the morning of Jan. 17, 1952, and hired a moving company to drag their furniture onto the street. In response, the families barricaded their doors. They sent their children to stay with relatives and passed baskets of food from window to window with ropes.

As word of the evictions spread, civic groups and labor unions called for a demonstration of support for the tenants. Hundreds of New Yorkers picketed at the complex, at City Hall and outside MetLife's headquarters at 1 Madison Avenue, where protesters held a round-the-clock vigil that lasted three days.

Fifteen hours before the city marshal's deadline, MetLife announced that it would postpone the evictions and agreed to negotiate. There followed three days of intense talks, and on the night of Jan. 20, MetLife agreed to drop the eviction proceedings. Several families who were regarded as especially problematic, including Dr. Lorch's, agreed to leave "voluntarily." In return, MetLife rented an apartment to the Hendrixes.

Black and Red

A photo of Hardine Jr. and my mother, holding hands and grinning, lay in a jumble of other grainy photos under glass on my grandparents' coffee table. My mother saved it, her only souvenir from her childhood friendship. Hardine Jr. was killed in a car accident, years before his parents died, according to Dr. Lorch, who stayed in touch with the family.

I first contacted Dr. Lorch, now 90 and on the faculty of York University in Toronto, three years ago. Oh, yes, he assured me, he remembered my grandparents.

When I asked what had happened to him after he left the Hendrixes in his apartment and accepted the position at Penn State, he referred me to the front page of The New York

Times of April 10, 1950, which reported that the college's officials had declined to renew his appointment, explaining that his decision to let the Hendrixes live in his apartment was "extreme, illegal and immoral and damaging to the public relations of the college."

Dr. Lorch also told me that Albert Einstein, whom he did not know personally, had written to Penn State, "supporting the position I had taken and calling upon them to reinstate me."

Dr. Lorch's political activism continued to hurt his career, he said. After being repeatedly blacklisted by universities and having dynamite placed in his garage, he moved to Canada.

During our conversation, he recalled that one Penn State official asked him directly if he was a Communist. It was not an unexpected question. Many members of the tenants committee were, in fact, Communists, and Councilman Davis, a sponsor of the anti-discrimination bill, was the council's Communist Party representative.

The Cold War was brewing during the Stuyvesant Town controversy, and tenants faced more anti-Communist sentiment than blatant racism. Linking the protesting tenants to Communism was a way to discredit them. Or, as Dr. Lorch remembered an N.A.A.C.P. official commenting wryly, "It's bad enough being black without being Red."

A World They Believed In

The eviction controversy had dragged out over two years. During that time the City Council housing bill making discrimination illegal in Stuyvesant Town was reintroduced. Although the bill passed, in February 1951, Stuyvesant Town did not integrate quickly or completely. In the following decades, potential black tenants did not necessarily feel welcome there. MetLife declined to provide statistics on the number of black tenants currently holding leases. Richard Shea, a spokesman for the Stuyvesant Town property, said he had no comment on the matter.

"My perception," said Leo Stevens, an African-American who has lived in Stuyvesant Town for 33 years and raised five children there, "is that excluding celebrities and black immigrants or foreigners, the number of 'average, everyday African-Americans' has been relatively static over the last 30 years. Our sparse number, spread out over this huge complex, makes it difficult to be accurate."

Mr. Stevens, a retired health care executive, does not attribute this situation to the kind of blatant discrimination practiced at Stuyvesant Town by MetLife in the past. Until recently, the complex's mostly rent-stabilized apartments experienced little turnover.

These days, the community is being transformed by MetLife's decision five years ago to renovate newly vacated apartments into luxury units with granite countertops and Kohler faucets, and rent them at market rates: about \$3,000 for a two-bedroom apartment.

"With rent stabilization, ethnic and class integration was possible if there was ever the will," Mr. Stevens said. "But now I don't see any hope for meaningful integration."

Most current Stuyvesant Town residents I've interviewed know almost nothing of the complex's troubled racial history. The plaque my grandfather and I photographed was removed from the grounds in the last year or so. As a friend who lives in Stuyvesant Town dryly points out, a market-rate housing complex can't advertise itself as a place for "families of moderate means." My grandfather would shake his head.

When I walk around Stuyvesant Town these days, it is a place soaked in imagination and memory. I wandered these paths with my grandparents 20 years ago, and since then I have wandered them again in my mind, tracking elusive fictional characters from my screenplay whom I have come to know as well as I know my own family. Here are the cold metal monkey bars where I played as a kid, where my 5-year-old mom and the real-life Hardine Jr. played. Here is the daffodil-lined fountain where all of us tossed pennies and wishes.

Though my grandfather, a published author, was a fan of the ice-skating epic I wrote at the age of 11, he did not live to see my more mature work. I don't know what he and my grandmother would have thought of my dramatizing the Stuyvesant Town story. My characters are not directly based on my grandparents, although their memory and spirit were never far away as I wrote.

Recently my family was viewing eight-millimeter movies my grandfather had taken, waxing nostalgic about my mother's childhood. Suddenly the footage shifted to a group of black and white children playing together on the Stuyvesant Town monkey bars as their parents looked on.

On the movie screen, it's just a few minutes of flickering film showing children in a playground, a glimpse of possibility. Then a card appears on the screen, with the date, 10-52, and fat letters my grandfather had drawn in red pen: "As It Should Be."

Amy Fox, a writer whose works include the script for the 2005 movie "Heights," is writing a screenplay about the integration of Stuyvesant Town.

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