Michael Harrington

WHEN ED KOCH WAS STILL A LIBERAL

Memories of a Man and His Times

I cannot give the precise date when I first met Ed Koch. Encountering this unassuming if enthusiastic man, I had no idea that he was going to play a major role in the political history of New York City. Koch was a young lawyer who had been, quite briefly, a member of the Tamawa Club, the stronghold of the "regular" Democrats in the South Village ("Little Italy") led by boss Carmine De Sapio. That hardly seemed a port of entry for an aspiring young Jewish politician. One election night, Stephanie Gervis, the *Village Voice* reporter whom I later married, was sent up to Tamawa and I went with her. We were asked to leave rather quickly—the *Voice* was a center of the anti-DeSapio movement—but not before we took in a room in which the women sat in chairs along the walls while the men milled around the center, and the ethnicity was as unmistakable as at Our Lady of Pompeii on Bleecker and Carmine Streets.

That ethnic description has to do with a fact, not with a prejudice. At the time we made our brief visit to Tamawa, Stephanie and I were living together just down from Our Lady of Pompeii in the heart of the Italian South Village. Our neighbors were easygoing and tolerant. We were not, then, unsympathetic to the ethnics who thronged the Tamawa Club that night. The simple reality was, however, that Tamawa was as Italian as the Democratic party of my youth in St. Louis was Irish. And Village Independent Democrats (VID), like the entire Manhattan left of that period, was heavily Jewish. So it was that Ed Koch rather quickly found his way up to the VID loft on Sheridan Square.

I simplify. When Sarah Schoenkopf (later Kovner) took her place at the Democratic State Committee, there were eleven reformers out of some three hundred members. That little band included WASPs of considerable wealth and family, like Marietta Tree, as well as Jewish reformers like Sarah. Indeed, the progressive wing of the New York Democrats was then something of an alliance between wealthy patrician reformers on the Averell Harriman model, and liberal "upstarts," usually Jewish. I had some reservations about the politics of these reformers, not least because I had never participated in the cult of Adlai Stevenson in 1952. The reformers had proclaimed him the first real egghead in American politics and all but idolized him. I thought of Stevenson as an aloof aristocrat who was really not at home in the party of the American working class, and as a Churchillian conservative who would have made a marvelous Tory candidate for prime minister—which in the United States put him on the left.

When I got to know Ed Koch, he was in the process of becoming the VID's candidate for district leader (male). He had the look of a diffident, somewhat lovable *schlemiel* and was utterly lacking in the overweening self-confidence he acquired as mayor. I liked him immediately, particularly when I discovered that the retiring, modest manner concealed a political maverick. There was a split in the reform movement between the purists and those who understood that they had to become politicians—a new and different kind, to be sure, but politicians nevertheless. At the VID, for instance, there were members who didn't want to get involved in the struggle over naming judges on the grounds that the whole process should be taken out of politics (they rarely specified how that could be achieved). Koch

was in the realist camp and would make funny, but acid, comments about his coworkers who were utterly dedicated to losing.

By a not surprising dialectic, once I had decided to enter the unprincipled precincts of the Democratic party it never occurred to me to be opposed to compromise. How could one be pure in an institution that was unprincipled on principle? My radicalism made me something of a realist, which may be why I found Koch's witty cynicism quite congenial.

Koch as a Liberal

This is not to say that he was simply a disappointed apprentice from Tamawa who had made his way to the VID for opportunistic reasons and therefore took the side of *realpolitik*. He was then a deeply committed and gutsy liberal. In 1964 he had gone to Mississippi in a summer that saw three civil rights workers (one black, two Jewish) murdered. That he was quite visible and quite Jewish was not something to endear him to the racists of Mississippi. In 1965 he had staked, and almost lost, his political career when he broke ranks and endorsed John Lindsay for mayor. Stephanie remembers him mulling over that decision in the *Village Voice* office, talking about it with Dan Wolfe, the then editor of the *Voice* who was his mentor. Koch, she remembers, was extremely nervous and very much aware of the danger of what he was doing.

There were those who wanted to purge the handful of liberal Democratic office holders that made the same courageous switch, but Koch survived his principled decision. Later, when he ran for Lindsay's old congressional seat, Lindsay endorsed the Republican candidate against him, an act that Koch bitterly resented. And rightly so.

Even in those early days, Koch was working out a position that turned out to be shrewd politics but pitted him against many in the VID. There was more than a little of the Town-Gown relationship between Tamawa and VID: the working Italian-Americans who lived in tenements, as against the college-educated, mainly Jewish reformers. I don't want to romanticize Little Italy. When Howard Moody, the pastor of Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square—officially a Baptist and United Church of Christ institution, which probably had more atheists, gays, lesbians, and political radicals than any other church in New York—tried to involve some of the leaders of the Italian community in an antidrug program, they resented his Protestant poaching and told him that their youth were not in any danger. A little later, a young man died from an overdose in a doorway just across from Our Lady of Pompeii.

There can be no doubt that the hostility of the Italian-Americans to the interracial scene in Washington Square was partly motivated by racist attitudes. But Ed Koch understood— rightly, I think—that racism was not the whole story. The traditionalist Villagers who lived in the tenements along MacDougal Street—a central artery of the Bohemian Village—were hardly being racist when they complained that they were kept up late at night by the floating party on the streets below. Koch was one of the first of the reformers to reach out to the Italians, to listen to their complaints, and even try to do something about them. That was innovative, intelligent, and, it turned out, good politics as well.

All of which made me admire Ed Koch as well as like him personally. Still, if truth be told, with each of his triumphs Stephanie and I were convinced that it would be his last. When he did defeat De Sapio, we thought he had had his moment—but then he went on to the City Council. That, we thought, would be the climax of a career that had already carried this maverick yet unprepossessing man to unimagined heights. The next thing I knew, Ed asked me to chair his citizens' committee when he ran for Congress. I agreed. Once more I thought Koch had set his sights too high. He won again, of course.

It was at this point that I began to give him advice he carefully ignored. Why not, I said to him, become a ten- or twelve- term member of the House? Pick a committee which is important to you, become its chairman, and help shape the legislative agenda of the nation. But what Ed Koch wanted, above all else, was to be mayor of New York City. This improbable politician would sit in a Village bar (but drink very little) and tell me how he wanted to be like Fiorello LaGuardia. I knew, of course, that that was an utter impossibility.

In the mid-1960s mayoralty campaigns were still in the future. Congressmember Koch had been one of the first politicians to oppose the Vietnam War. At one of the huge Washington mobilizations at which he spoke, someone who came after him began to denounce Israel as a puppet of American imperialism. Koch recounted with gusto how he, a dignitary on this occasion, had rushed toward the podium and yelled "Fuck you!" at the speaker. I liked that quality in Koch and I shared his support of Israel, an attitude that was sometimes controversial in the rarefied precincts of the reform movement.

That maverick spirit was also quite visible during one of the worst moments in New York politics: the school strike in 1968. I have to go a long way around in describing that event, but doing so will

identify some of the factors that led to Ed Koch's dramatic political shift in the 1970s.

John Lindsay, elected mayor in 1965 with Koch's support, had decentralized the public school system, creating local and elected district boards of education. In the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section, a black ghetto in Brooklyn, a bitter dispute occurred. Several white teachers were summarily removed by the local, predominantly black school board and sent back to the central office for reassignment to another district. The union challenged that action on grounds of due process, a challenge I approved. But that move was seen by blacks and a majority of Manhattan reformers as an authoritarian, even racist, policy. A bitter struggle followed, which was part tragedy—a conflict between two rights—and part an ugly farce pitting a superficial utopianism against an insensitive emphasis upon formal rights. I found myself in the middle, agreeing with the union on the specific issue, sympathetic to the local black school board and yet suspicious of some absurd claims made on its behalf.

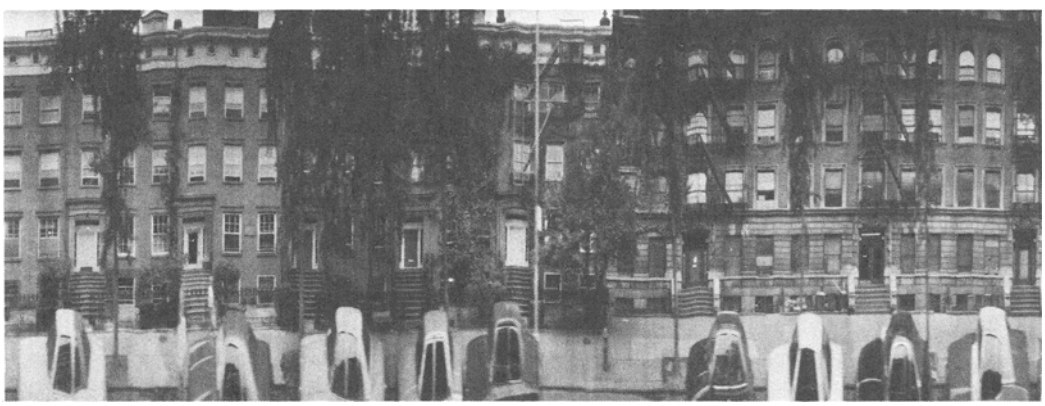
Not a few of the black activists and reformers believed that decentralization was a gate to the educational millennium. If only the local community could control its own institutions, the children would miraculously increase their reading, and other academic, skills. But, I argued in the debates of that time, shrewd conservatives like William F. Buckley, Jr., and Barry Goldwater were perfectly willing to let poor blacks have community control of their ghettos in Brooklyn and Manhattan so long as rich whites had community control of Park Avenue and Wall Street. In the name of a romantic exaltation of the "power of the people," many advocates of a decentralist panacea had forgotten about the power of class structures. White teachers—Jewish white teachers, for there was sometimes more than a hint of anti-Semitism in the dispute—were *the* cause of educational backwardness among so many of the poor. Give authority to a local school board, and leave every other social determinant in its unjust place, and all would be well.

Al Shanker, president of the United Federation of Teachers, tended to treat the issue as if it were a simple collective-bargaining dispute. He routinely talked on television about the contract, but ignored the fact that the actions of many in the black community were a desperate *cri de coeur* over the fate of children. The utopianism of the local militants was more a product of the social agony of their daily lives than of the shallow theories they sometimes espoused. I supported the union, yet I was all but torn in two by my profound sympathies with those on the other side who, I thought, were morally right, legally wrong, and very ill-advised by theorists from outside their community.

I was then quite friendly with Al Shanker. The first time I met him, in 1964 or 1965, we had together visited a New Jersey grape importer urging him to honor Cesar Chavez's boycott of nonunion grapes from California, and he had gone on to play a major role in supporting that struggle of poor—and mainly minority—workers. Around the same time, there was a united front of the United Federation of Teachers and the militant black community in a boycott of a school system in which inferior education of the poor and shabby treatment of the teachers alike. When Shanker was jailed in a union dispute in 1965 he received a check from Martin Luther King, Jr., to help pay his costs (and shrewdly framed it rather than cash it). Shanker was later to move toward neoconservatism, like certain others of my comrades of that period. But in 1968, I was unaware that such reversals were soon to take place.

My wife suggested that I try to persuade Al to articulate the union position as a commitment to the children rather than as a case for the sanctity of the contract.

I went to the Gramercy Park Hotel, where



Shanker was staying for the duration of the dispute, and was admitted to his room by an armed guard (given the virulence of the dispute, that was not a sign of paranoia). The local board, I said to Al, was presenting its case in terms of the children, and he was talking only about union rights. He was, I continued, committed to the children, too, and should make clear that the union's position was not based on mere legalism.

The insistence on tenure rights, I suggested, should be thought of as a means to attain quality education for all, particularly for minority youth. Al was extremely receptive to my message and told me that he would take it to heart. The next night, or so it seemed to me, he was back to talking about the contract.

The progressive community was deeply divided. There were reform Democrats who broke into public schools and tried to keep them open despite the strike—an action the entire left would have denounced as "scabbing" only a few years before. There were also some anti-Semitic leaflets passed out in Brooklyn. At the same time, the cause of the black community school district was clearly one that commanded moral solidarity on the part of anyone committed to civil rights. And that was true even though the claims for the educational gains to be made through decentralization were obviously extreme. (To his credit, Kenneth Clark, an articulate champion of the local board, later candidly said that he had been wrong in claiming that decentralization would have an enormous educational impact.)

This 1968 confrontation was to prefigure the split in the liberal-labor-black movement which was a precondition of Republican presidential victories. It was also one of the reasons why Ed Koch was to change so much in the 1970s.

Dissonant Notes

It was during those years that I went with Koch, then running for Congress, to a meeting of the upper-middle-class left in a comfortable Manhattan apartment. Koch's position was suitably unclassifiable and, I think, quite genuine. He was, he said, opposed to the strike on the grounds that it was a violation of the state law that denied public employees the right to walk off the job. That satisfied those who were, for whatever reason, against the strike. But, Koch continued, he supported the union's basic demand with regard to the teachers who had been summarily removed. That sat well with the union and its backers. One could argue that this was a calculated exercise in political opportunism, but I don't think so now and didn't then. I did not agree with him—I thought the state antistrike law an abomination—yet I found his strange attitude totally consistent with his maverick personality. It was, I thought (and think), of a piece with his simultaneous anticommunism and opposition to the Vietnam War.

In any case, I continued to regard Ed as part of my own world and, as late as the summer of 1974, he endorsed my candidacy for delegate to the Democratic Mid-Term Convention. But by then there were some significant intimations that a change was under way.

In 1973, Koch began testing the waters for a mayoral candidacy. He asked Stephanie and me to invite a few friends over to our place in the West Village. Ed arrived with a small retinue from his congressional staff. One of those present was Norman Dorsen, a professor at New York University Law School and a major figure in the American Civil Liberties Union. There soon broke out a sharp conflict between Dorsen, me, and Stephanie on one side, and Ed Koch on the other.

This was not too long after a furious dispute about a proposed public housing project in the middle- and upper-middle-class area of Forest Hills. The actual proposal, I felt, was ill-conceived: a huge high-rise project in the midst of houses and apartments built to a much more human scale. But is was quite clear that a good part of the opposition to the Forest Hills scheme was based not on objections to a flawed plan, but on a racist hostility to any public housing that would bring blacks into the neighborhood. The liberal position—to build the project, but scaled down, so that it would fit into the area—was defended by a young Italian-American lawyer from Queens named Mario Cuomo. The opponents of the project engaged in strident, and almost openly racist, rhetoric. And Koch took their side.

That evening in our apartment on Perry Street, Ed talked about the need for a social-environmental impact statement whenever public housing was proposed. Strongly challenged by Norman Dorsen and me, he went so far as to argue that blacks really wanted to stay in their own neighborhoods, that they didn't want to mix with whites (many of whom, in the case of Forest Hills, were Jewish). I was appalled. Still, the debate was civil, though sharp. As the evening came to an end, Stephanie said—and I agreed completely—"Ed, don't give up your principles as a tactic in a mayoral campaign you can't even win." We were right on the first, moral count; but in 1977, history was to prove us wrong in our prediction. Ed's switch was indeed one of the reasons he became mayor of New York.

Forest Hills, a turning point for both Koch and the

liberal Jewish community, was in some ways a continuation of the civil war that had started within the left during the Teachers' strike of 1968. It took a while for me to realize that Ed Koch's attitude on Forest Hills was not an isolated exercise but a deliberate political move. In 1975 and 1976, as he geared up for a serious run for the mayoralty in 1977, he moved to the right on a whole series of issues. He began to emphasize his support for capital punishment, a position totally irrelevant to the office of mayor but having a lot to do with the feelings of the white, middle-class electorate in New York. So it was that in the 1977 race I found myself backing Bella Abzug against Ed Koch. And therein lies a story.

Bella and Ed

My early relations with Bella were a disaster but by the mid-1970s I had changed my mind about her. My original hostility had much to do with style—but also with a historic association of style and substance. Bella's manner was, and is, legendary in American politics: forceful, aggressive, sometimes (particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s) strident and even downright nasty. She was no doubt regularly victimized by a double standard: qualities deemed abrasive in a woman are often celebrated in a man.

When I first encountered Bella, I interpreted her style as an expression of a leftist tradition of high-minded viciousness, an ugly inheritance from Karl Marx's dyspeptic attitude toward all opponents. Bella had been a left Zionist as a college student and had learned her lesson all too well. I sensed a certain anti-anticommunism in her attitudes, a political position that was often expressed vituperatively. My reaction to Bella, then, was historical and political as well as personal.

Indeed, in the 1960s, one of the bonds between Ed Koch and me was a shared antipathy to Bella's manner as well as some questions about her views on the Middle East. But after the 1972 election, I became aware that she was one of the hardest-working, most effective members of Congress. A friend of mine, Steve Silbiger, then an aide to Representative Steve Solarz of Brooklyn, began to tell me, from an insider's vantage point, that she was a very serious liberal who, unlike some of her more mannerly colleagues, did an enormous amount of effective work. So my attitude began to change. At the same time, her attitudes toward both Soviet injustice and the defense of Israel, whatever they may once have been, were now similar to my own. When she ran against Daniel Moynihan for the Senate nomination in 1976, I was enthusiastic about her candidacy. It was not just that she would begin to integrate the Senate, the most sexist institution in American politics, but also that I thought she had a capacity to be a great senator. I still think I was right.

And so by 1977, my old friend, Ed Koch, had moved to the right and was running for mayor in a spirit that, I thought, appealed to some of the worst racist and anti-union emotions in the city, and I was a supporter of Bella Abzug, toward whom I had once been somewhat antagonistic. Still, I was not going to forget personal links even though political relations had changed. So I called up John LoCicero, an organizational lieutenant for Ed, and had coffee with him. I still liked Ed, I explained, but I now disagreed with him on some fundamental issues and could not support him for mayor. I asked LoCicero to inform Koch that my backing for Bella was not a personal matter but the result of deeply held political convictions.

Later, after Ed was elected, a friend of mine who had stuck with him told me that he had been quite angry that I had not, despite our differences, backed him. But even then there were still some strange twists left in our relationship.

In the primary, Koch had come in first, but he had to win a runoff race against Mario Cuomo. By that time, Stephanie and I were living on Mercer Street, a few short blocks from Ed's apartment on Washington Place. One night we ran into him as we emerged from an Italian restaurant. Stephanie spoke with considerable emotion, telling him she wanted to vote for him for old time's sake, but that some of his positions made it difficult to do so. She mentioned his attitude toward minorities and the unions and said, among other things, that he had to promise to talk with Victor Gotbaum, the leading public-employees trade unionist in town. Ed agreed and, after he won the runoff and was assured of victory, was as good as his word. Ed, his campaign adviser Dave Garth, Vic Gotbaum, and Stephanie and I had dinner together at Charley O's, a favorite Koch hangout.

There were two striking aspects of that dinner. One was that Koch told Gotbaum that, even as mayor-elect, he found it all but impossible to discover what the city finances really were (at this point, New York City was still in a deep fiscal crisis). And second, although Dave Garth was friendly and open, it was a new development in American politics that the leader of the largest city in the nation would, when meeting with the municipality's most powerful trade unionist, bring his media adviser along.

A year later—a year of bitter acrimony between Koch and Gotbaum—Stephanie and I were asked to dinner at the Gotbaums' as part of a kind of peace effort on both sides. Ed Koch and a few others were there; but it was a small affair and everything began on a pleasant, low key.

Early on I took Ed aside and talked with him about Ruth Messinger, a member of the City Council whom he was crudely attacking as a pro-Communist. And that brings me to the person who is, in many ways, the heroine of this story.

A Reformer Who Stayed That Way

I'm not sure exactly when I met Ruth. She was an activist on the West Side of Manhattan, one of those strange enclaves in which the left was the dominant political power. That meant, among other things, that it was the scene of titanic rhetorical battles over nuances of antiwar or antiracist and antisexist politics that would have been bewildering, not just to the Midwest but to Queens and Brooklyn as well. Ruth had managed to build a constituency and yet maintain a high seriousness about political and social issues.

One of her most trusted advisers was Paul DuBrul, who had joined the socialist movement when he was a student at Hunter College in the early 1960s. Ruth shared our politics and joined the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC).

Over the years, Ruth had done her homework, becoming an effective politician and then City Council member. Reformers—and it is not a sin peculiar to them—had a tendency to lofty generalizations, passionate opinions, and slipshod data. Ruth remained true to her basic principles, but she had learned to relate them to reality better than anyone I know. At the same time, she had been more giving of her time and commitment to DSOC (and later to Democratic Socialists of America—DSA) than any of our members in elected public life. And now Koch was red-baiting her.

I had often talked, privately and publicly, with Ruth on questions concerning freedom, democracy, and the Soviet sphere, and she was as horrified by violations of civil rights there as I. And her trusted confidant, Paul DuBrul, was implacably critical of the very foundation of the antidemocratic Communist regimes. He and Ruth, and the rest of us, were also opponents of America's militarist response to Communist wrongs, and proponents of disarmament and peace. Now Koch, who had seemed to have that very same mix of attitudes when he opposed American intervention in Vietnam, was turning on Ruth in a scandalous way.

So I told him at the Gotbaums' what I said to him in a letter: that he was profoundly wrong about Ruth. He was, alas, noncommittal and his hostility to her continues to this day.

Have I then merely confirmed one of the oldest clichés of American politics? Was Ed Koch somewhat radical as a powerless young man, who then became smart and unprincipled as he got older and as serious power beckoned? I don't think so.

Why or Did Koch Change?

No doubt, life plays a conservatizing role with most of us. Those blinding, all-encompassing radical certitudes that sometimes are the epiphanies of youth no longer seem so dazzling. Complexities and shadows come into view. And yes, the actual exercise of power, or even its mere imminence, is often a reason for second thoughts.

But there are at least two basic objections to turning such insights into anything like a complete account of social realty. First, if individuals change in this fashion, the world does not. It may well be that younger people, fired with the passion to do something about poverty and war and injustice, become more conformist when they grow old. But that is sad since poverty and war and injustice do not disappear just because aging radicals are less willing to fight them.

And second, the cynical thesis operates imperfectly. That my worldview is more complicated than it was when I became a socialist at the age of twenty is obvious. But I have remained a socialist. And if Ed Koch changed, Ruth Messinger did not. One cannot deal with these matters on the basis of a few scraps of *realpolitik*.

Why did the process of conservatization become so much more pronounced in the 1970s and 1980s? One cannot account for that simply on the basis of individual life cycles. It is necessary to look at the social and historical context.

Ed Koch was, after all, not the only Jewish antiwar liberal who moved to the right. He was part of a social trend affecting many people like him, which is one of the reasons why I reject the simplistic notion that he simply "sold out." Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* who happily printed my articles in the 1960s and then moved even further to the right than Koch in the 1970s and 1980s gained neither office nor money by his transformation. The explanation of Koch's conver-

sion as a mere "sellout" misses trends much larger than the alleged opportunism of a single politician.

There was, after all, a general tendency within the Jewish left to turn from socialism or liberalism to neoconservatism. Koch was not an intellectual, yet he was certainly affected by the intellectual trends in the Jewish community. But since there were non-Jews who made the same transition—one thinks, for instance, of the Catholic writer Michael Novak who, as a peace activist, considered himself well to my left and then wound up far to my right—why insist upon the Jewish dimension of Koch's transformation?

Because the issue of Israel played an important role in it—not simply for him, but for a whole stratum of Jews in his generation. With the rise of the New Left in the 1960s, there was a simplistic trend to think of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as just another movement of national liberation that all progressives should support. Since the PLO was locked in struggle with Israel, that meant, it was illogically reasoned, that Israel must be a part of the imperialist system. That the Israelis themselves represented an earlier national liberation movement and that their conflict with the PLO was a counterposition of two legitimate rights was an idea too sophisticated for some of the youthful activists of the 1960s.

There were similar problems within the United States. During the terrible fight over school decentralization in New York in 1968, there were anti-Semitic leaflets and speeches from the side of those who saw themselves as pitted against a Jewish-led union. That some blacks were driven to such racism by the impossible conditions they had to confront in their daily lives makes it easier to explain even if it provides no reason for condoning what they said. The upper-middle- or even upper-class whites whose salon radicalism ignored, or even justified, that anti-Semitism in 1968 were intellectually wrong and morally reprehensible in a much less ambiguous sense than those whom they defended.

Koch was often rightly critical of the superficial and purist leftism in the early reform movement. He and people like him understandably turned their backs on the mistakes of their onetime friends and then wrongly embraced the principles of their onetime enemies.

In 1980, Koch, by then mayor of New York, made it quite clear that he regarded voting for Ronald Reagan as a decent thing to do. Like many others, he was responding to the crisis of liberalism when he moved to the right. There was a heady atmosphere in New York during the first term of John Lindsay. There was an alliance between an educated and privileged left and an impoverished, mainly black, mass. The go-go years were in full swing and it seemed that an endlessly growing GNP would finance permanent social experimentation. In point of fact, the experiments were much more moderate than the rhetoric. But then the weather changed. When the American economy was internationalized in an unprecedented fashion, when productivity dropped, when new jobs were primarily low paid and unorganized, and so on, many liberals came to agree with Richard Nixon.

The 1960s, Nixon had said in an enormously influential interview the day after his landslide reelection in 1972, had "thrown money at problems." That, as I have demonstrated at book length in *The New American Poverty* and *The Next Left*, was simply not true. The New York City crisis was not a result of the overcommitment of John Lindsay and other liberals. It was the consequence of massive national and international trends. Nixon's simplistic argument did not call for new attempts at innovation in a period when many people were politically tired, and was therefore quite popular. It was not just Ed Koch who embraced such notions. The Democratic Party did too.

Am I saying that Ed Koch was totally unconcerned with the political advantages that accrued to him personally when he shifted toward the right? Not at all. He was not simply the plaything of economic and intellectual trends, but neither was he the pure product of opportunism. He was, very much like the rest of us, a complex man. He did indeed become much too friendly with the real estate interests that built a Manhattan designed for the rich and trendy. That, I think, was his most grievous fault. And it was sad that a man of Koch's personal honesty should have been unaware of the corruption of some of his political allies.

I still think that, in another period, his self-interest and his very real idealism could have yielded a different outcome. But his evolution was not dictated by fate, as Ruth Messinger proves. As she matured, she became more serious, more effective, in her basic commitment.

There was a meeting at the New School in the fall of 1986. A group of German politicians and journalists were visiting the United States, and they talked with some New Yorkers, including city bureaucrats, Ruth Messinger, and me. At one point, a spokesperson for the city launched into a description of all the things that had been done for the homeless. Ruth got up to point out that these things had been achieved under a court order, and

proceeded to analyze the complicity of New York in creating homelessness, with precise references to laws and policies. She was as radical as when I first met her years ago and she had deepened her values by making them more informed than ever before.

The case of Ed Koch can be cited by superficial cynics. But the party of hope has Ruth Messinger.□

Morris Dickstein

NEIGHBORHOODS

I was doing some research at the Library of Congress, going through crime films of the 1940s for an article on that distinctive American genre, the *film noir*. This was still the era of the great studios, which could simulate virtually anything on the back lot. But a few producers set out to find authentic locations to give these films a documentary look. I was only a few minutes into Mark Hellinger's famous 1948 movie *The Naked City* when I began to feel like Proust munching on the madeleine. These crowded streets of the Lower East Side, with their grimy tenements and narrow sidewalks, their tiny candy stores, pushcart peddlers, and slope-backed cars, gave me back some vivid images from my childhood. Here was Columbia Street, where my father grew up and his brothers lived; wide Delancey Street, with its grand movie palace and innumerable lanes of traffic leading onto the Williamsburg Bridge on which the film's brilliant climactic chase takes place. Here was the city itself as it appeared in the 1940s, the real protagonist of the movie, with Mark Hellinger on the sound track saying, "There are eight million stories in the naked city." Mine was one of them.

I thought I had long since put the Lower East Side behind me. Like so many Jewish families, my parents had gotten out: moved to Queens in 1949, when I was nine, to open a small business, just when mom-and-pop stores had pretty much had their day. Feeling isolated among lower-middle-class Irish and Italians in Flushing, my folks kept up the umbilical tie to the old neighborhood, which had the only good bakeries and delicatessens, the only real synagogues and yeshivas, the best bargains, and so on. My own ties grew frayed and were eventually forgotten, buried beneath an Ivy League demeanor and a not wholly convincing new personality as an intellectual and a citizen of the world. I belonged to the culture of the West, not the parochialism of the ghetto.

By the end of the 1960s this universalism seemed a trifle hollow, even within the cosmopolitan literary culture of the Upper West Side. The protest movements of the 1960s had encouraged people to "do their own thing," and this lent impetus to a growing pluralism. After a long period of amnesia, I somehow remembered where I came from.

So one day I found myself driving a good friend around the streets of the Lower East Side, which I hadn't seen for ten years or more. Everything looked smaller than I remembered, as if isolated under glass, but charged with a strong emotional current. I was in a keyed-up and sentimental mood, and as we passed the house on Henry Street where I had spent my first decade, I turned and beamed, as if this were Mecca and Medina rolled into one. My friend was silent for a long time, then said haltingly, "But . . . this is a . . . slum." I felt crushed under the weight of a sociological category I had never previously considered.

I suppose the house *was* a slum, though I remembered it as a clean building, a cut above its surroundings, with stable, hard-working tenants, most of whom held down blue-collar jobs. The building was a walk-up with four three-room apartments on each floor. Young couples with young