A RAGS TO RICHES TO TRUE RICHES STORY

FROM THE PROJECTS TO

The Palace

GREG HERSHEYBERG
My father and me with my sisters at the table
My Jewish Parents

January 1959, I was born to Jewish parents, in that garden spot of the universe, the Bronx, New York. Both my parents had their roots and lineage in European Jewry. My father’s family line was from Germany, my mother’s from Austria and Poland.

I would not describe my father as the typical Jewish dad. First of all, most Jewish men tend to be highly educated. The Jewish men that I came in contact with later in life were doctors, lawyers, accountants, etc. They were mild mannered and usually very gentle when it came to discipline.

My father was not. He was a product of the Great Depression, being only ten years old in 1929. He and his family struggled very much during the next few years, then his father died and he had to help provide for his younger brother and sister.

My father got married at 20, volunteered for the military and went off to fight in World War II as a Ranger. While he was at war, his first wife sent him a message that she was leaving him for another man. He had had a baby girl with this woman, and when the war was over he went to look for his child. My father was told they were living in Florida and that his daughter was sick and mistreated. He was determined to find her, so off to Florida he went.

He found his ex-wife and daughter and the new husband. When he tried to get his daughter, the new husband called the police. A fight ensued and my father was off to jail. My mother tells me that if it weren’t for the Jewish War Veterans, he would have stayed in jail a long time. As it was, he was released from jail but banned from the state of Florida. He came back to New York, met my mother — actually,
their mothers matched them up together — and they were married.

Later, when my dad had a new baby girl, his first daughter, Merilee, who was now 17, came to New York looking for her father. They literally ran into each other in the city, and Merilee asked my father if she could move in with him and his new family. My mother accepted this new addition to their young family with joy. This was long before I was born, so I only knew her as my sister. I didn’t find out until I was older that she was actually my half-sister.

My father had a tough life, to say the least. He was not raised in a Jewish lifestyle at all. My mother was, and being part of a synagogue was important to her, so she dragged my father to synagogue each Shabbat. I was told that he never liked it, but he bore it for Mother’s sake because she desperately wanted me to be Bar Mitzvah-ed.

My father was a hard-working World War II veteran who had been awarded the Bronze Star for bravery and the Purple Heart for being severely wounded in combat. (He was actually missing in action for a while.) Being a child of the Great Depression, you can just imagine how he took nothing — and I mean nothing — for granted. Because of this tough upbringing, he marinated me in the sobering fact that nothing was coming to me and I have to work hard if I wanted to succeed. About luck, he would say, “The harder you work the luckier you get.”

He also told me, “Son, there are three kinds of people in the world. The first is a person who makes things happen. The second is a person who watches things happen, and the third is a person who wonders, ‘What happened?’” He would then ask me, “Which kind of person do you want to be, kid?”

My dad worked for the United States Postal Service at their main distribution branch in Long Island City, New York. His days were spent sorting and loading parcels. The work was mindless and tedious to say the least, but with four children and a wife to support, he did what he had to do to make
ends meet. He never, ever spoke about his job because he never, ever enjoyed his work. It is so sad that he had to spend his entire working life at a job he utterly despised. But it wasn’t about him, it was about his family.

Other vivid memories of my father are as follows: He loved to dress a little flashy; he loved jazz, and he loved listening to Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday.

My mother, who frequently spoke Yiddish, was and still is the most unselfish, honest, forthright person I know. She has been a wonderful example to me of how a person should love others. My mother began her career as a social worker in Harlem. Soon after, she became a school teacher in the South Bronx. She shaped the minds of kindergarten-age children and taught them to love learning. She was an incredible educator, and to this day there are former students who remember her due to her tremendous dedication and devotion to their educations.

My father loved my mother dearly and displayed this love frequently. Loving her and his four children was his one and only hobby. I remember him hugging my mom all the time. I also have fond memories of him grabbing hold of her, singing their anniversary song, “The Days of Wine and Roses,” and dancing with her. He adored her and admired her. He being without education was so proud of her having a college degree and being a teacher. All he asked of her was that she not bring her job home with her, but because she loved her job so much, that was impossible.
My father never spoke much or shared his feelings. My dad was also a childhood diabetic. My mom said he had a secret fear of going blind due to his diabetes. Thus his diet was very healthy. He stayed away from sugar, eating diabetic desserts instead. Mom wasn’t the greatest cook, but Dad ate everything she made and always told her it was delicious.

Both my parents were solid citizens who were very dedicated to their family and to each other. They had a real solid influence on my life, and I was blessed by being raised in a home where values and morals were taught.

My Childhood

As I mentioned, we lived in the Bronx in a low-income housing project. By the 1970s, many Jews who had lived in the Bronx had become affluent and moved out to the suburbs. Our family was not one of those families, so we stayed behind in the projects along with most of the elderly Jewish folks who had to stay because of their fixed incomes.

Our neighborhood was located at the intersection of White Plains Road and Gun Hill Road, and was known as the “Gun Hill Projects.” There were six buildings with twelve stories each, and they were vast. When I went back as an adult, the buildings struck me as looking more like prisons than apartment buildings. It was a rough and tough place, to say the least. In the projects, we were exposed to drugs, broken households and crime.

Our apartment was small with only two bedrooms. I slept in the same room with my two sisters. By this time, Merilee
had gotten married and was out of the house. In our bedroom, we had a bunk bed and a twin bed just about on top of each other. We did not have much in the way of finances for buying new clothes and such, but my mother always made sure we were more than presentable when we went to school.

Our furniture was sparse. My dad had a reclining yard chair in his bedroom, where he would sit to read the newspaper and listen to the radio. With that chair and the radio, he thought he had the life!

He also had a movie camera and was always taking pictures of us. There were six giant lights that he would shine in our faces and say, “It’s a moving picture, so move!” Then he loved to have us all sit down to watch ourselves in those jumpy, short, silent films.

We went to public school and we came home to an empty house as my mother and father both worked. My father took three trains to get to work, so he was up at about 4:30 a.m. I never saw him in the morning, but we always got together for dinner. My mom and dad were involved in our lives as much as they could possibly be. They did what they had to do to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Please don’t misunderstand; we had wonderful neighbors in our housing project. Many good people lived there. We had a cross section of ethnicities — something of a melting pot of nations.

We had many friends whom we played with constantly. No need for play dates, nor organized sports, and what in the world was an indoor playground? We would just go out-

Me in our shared bedroom
side and play stickball, hot peas and butter, or off the stoop. We were not organized, just a bunch of kids choosing up sides and playing some good, old Bronx games. My life as a youngster was so very different than my children’s lives today.

We had some board games, but we mainly went down the street to the school yard, or we would play in the “park” nearby. It wasn’t really a park as it was all cement. It had a basketball hoop, a handball court, a place to play stickball, and a 1-foot-deep cement pool with sprinklers that were turned on in the summer. These were the days you could go off for hours, and there were no worries about pedophiles or abductions.

Across the street from the projects was what we called the “island.” Of course, it wasn’t an actual island surrounded by water. It was a sidewalk that was shaped like an oval located under the elevated trains. In the center were some benches where my father would sit and read a newspaper as we rode our bikes around the perimeter.

My sisters and I were incredibly close. We did everything together, and we looked out for one another. Everywhere my sisters went, they would take me along. It was just expected that they would do that. They helped make my life a lot of fun. I have this vivid memory from when I was young. I had these football-uniform pajamas and my sisters would throw me the football in the apartment, and when I made believe I scored, they would act like cheerleaders and give out a shout on my behalf.

I remember in the summer walking with my dad and family about a mile and a half to Carvel just to get a chocolate dipped ice cream cone. This was a highlight to me. Today, people think they have to do something big, but I disagree. It is the little things that can make the biggest difference in a person’s life sometimes.

So, although we were poor financially, we were filthy rich in so many other ways.
When I was a little older, my dad got us a membership at a pool club called Shorehaven for the summers. We took a bus there. It was on the Long Island Sound in the Bronx. It had a large swimming pool that we thought was amazing.

My Dad And Me

I loved my father immensely. I always felt a sense of profound protection from him even when he was not around. I knew he wasn’t going to let anyone hurt me. Although he was tough and physically impressive, he was tender as well. He had a very deep love for me. I was not allowed to go to bed at night without kissing him goodnight on the cheek. To this day, I can still remember how his whiskers felt against my lips. He was so very proud of his son, his only son, and he would always brag about me.

I loved my father so much that I had this haunting fear that he might die. I even had recurring nightmares about it. I would wake up feeling terrified and was always so relieved to go to his room and discover it was only a dream.

As I said, I was the only boy, so my father, being a man’s man, poured himself into me. Because he was raised during the Depression, he never really had time to be a kid and do the things that kids do, so he would live vicariously through me. Because he had such limited opportunities in life, my success would be his success. I was going to be the straight A
student, the star athlete, the achiever of greatness. He even had this standing joke with me. He'd say, “If you want, kid, you could be the first Jewish president.”

He ingrained in me a spirit of excellence, so I always would go for the gold, especially when it came to my studies. He would say, “Be the best you can be. Strive for excellence, and do not settle for second best.” I remember when I would take a test at school and come home with a 97 percent, my father would ask if anyone got a 100 percent. In other words he was asking, “Did anyone beat you?”

My father’s line of thinking still resonates in my soul even to this day. I tend to place a great deal of pressure on myself. On a good note, his teaching served me well. I ended up graduating high school at the top of my class, and I managed to be awarded an academic scholarship to college.

I do not remember having many conversations with my father about life. He didn’t talk much. Most parents were not close with their children fifty years ago. There was a generation gap that is so very different from today. The truth is, he had a short fuse. We never knew what was going to set him off.

One year, Dad was able to scrape enough money together for my mom, him and me to fly to California to visit his mother. This was a major deal for us to get on an airplane. While in California, he took me to Disneyland, his movie camera in hand. Again, this was another privilege beyond my wildest childhood dreams. While there, Dad handed me the precious camera to hold while he bought us some food or tickets or something. The camera was heavy, so me being a typical boy, I set it down on the ground. Well, my dad could not believe I did such a careless thing. His fuse was ignited and I got it. But, as I said, he was also very affectionate. He was devoted to my mom and us, and he was a solid provider. I remember feeling very secure in his love.

Dad was very interested in sports. I remember him always trying to teach me about sports and playing some
paddleball with him. I also remember my father constantly trying to build up my body. I was born with a concave chest known medically as pectus excavatum. My father did not receive a good report from the doctors back in 1959, so he took measures in his own hands. As I grew older, he bought me pectoral cables, bull workers, weights, etc. He wanted me to be able to build my muscles because the doctors told my parents I might not be able to play sports due to this condition.

Dad also had a humorous side. While we were in California, Grandma took us on a side trip to Las Vegas, where Dad won big playing the slot machine. The bells went off and he was told he won $500, a huge amount of money back then. My grandmother got all excited, grabbing him and yelling his nickname over and over. He called a security guard over and said, “Officer, this crazy lady is bothering me.”

“What?!! I’m your mother!” Grandma was shocked.

Without missing a beat, Dad said, “See, officer, she thinks she’s my mother!” Dad loved to play jokes like that on people. He did it all the time.

As I mentioned, my dad was very proud of me and I think I know why. I believe he was very insecure about his lack of education. Because of it, he lacked confidence and kept to himself. He really didn’t have any friends. He wanted so badly for his children to get a solid education. For whatever reason, I seemed to be the child who showed the most interest in schooling. Perhaps it was because my father invested more time with me than the others. I don’t know. But I’m glad I could please him.

I remember playing some football on the block with my friends. They were rough kids who rarely went to school. Most of their fathers were gone and their moms worked. My friends played hooky all the time while their moms thought they were in school. Sadly enough, most of them didn’t even graduate high school. They also got very involved with drugs. Actually, I had two sets of friends. I had friends at school
who were predominantly Jewish and were in the advanced classes like myself. Then I had my real friends at home, who lived on the same block as me and were totally non-Jewish. They were Italian, Irish and Hispanic. Their names were Vin-nie, Michael, Louie, Carlos, etc. I hung around with them on a regular basis. I kind of had this bad boy attitude but with a really good head on my shoulders. The Jewish kids weren’t fun enough or “cool” enough for Greg. I was going to be a tough Jew.

My neighborhood friends didn’t really know that I was smart because I didn’t want them to know. You see, it wasn’t considered cool to be smart. Go figure. So I lived this double life—schoolboy by day and bad boy by night. I guess I really didn’t know who I was.

When I would get my report card, my father would be blown away because in junior high and high school I would always get straight A’s. This one particular day, my dad saw my report card and came running out in the street to show my friends. I was so embarrassed, as they finally knew. It ended up that some of the guys were actually proud of me.

Now let me say here that whenever I took standardized tests, I did very well in the math and science sections, but performed miserably in the reading comprehension sections. However, back in that day, there wasn’t much stock put in those tests, so those low scores didn’t bother my father too much. My keen memory helped me compensate for my poor reading comprehension. I could remember almost word-for-word what the teachers said. In the higher grades, I would read the Cliff Notes of the required books and regurgitate them well for term papers and essay questions on tests. Of course, this was back in the 1960s before we knew much about dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, and hyperactivity disorder. (For those who are not familiar with Cliff Notes, they are summary study guides for classic literature, and they are used by the student to bypass the arduous task of reading the entire book.)
In The Projects

My father never drove, but he did persuade my mother to drive. She got her license when she was about 43 years old, and so we finally had freedom to come and go as we liked. We would travel every weekend to upstate New York to visit Merilee and her children. Family was very important to my dad.

Merilee had married a great guy. Dad thought she had hit it big! They lived in the country on five acres. They had a small house with a little circular drive, but to Dad, who had lived only in the projects, it was the Taj Mahal.

I also remember Tuesday evenings very well. My mother was studying for her master's degree, and she had class after work on Tuesdays. So my dad and I would go to eat at the Chinese restaurant, and we would foot race home to see who was the fastest. He always won this race.

Overall, I wish my father was able to communicate better and share his heart with me. Recently, I talked to my mom about Dad’s lack of communication, and she said she didn’t even feel like she knew him very well. I am unfortunately a lot like my dad in having a short fuse sometimes, but I am able to express myself better than he was. So I can explain to people why I’m feeling upset. The bottom line is my father did the best he could with the skills he had. His love was apparent in not what he said, but in what he did.

My mother on the other hand was very gentle and sweet. She never hit us. She wanted me to be nonviolent, so she wouldn’t let Dad talk to me about the war or the military. She was an educator, and she also was so very proud of me. She would always take me to school when I had the day off and show me off to her fellow teachers.

What I loved the most about growing up was having dinner together as a family. To this day, it is very important for my wife, my four children, and I to have dinner together. I guess I loved it so much that I have continued the tradition some 30 years later. I thank God I have such fond family memories.
Childhood Anti-Semitic Experience

Being Jewish, I experienced anti-Semitism. There were incidences when I was called a “Jew bastard” or a “cheap Jew.” The boys in my neighborhood were so tough and scary to me when I was little. Anti-Semitic remarks frequently came out of their mouths, not necessarily just to me. They even used similar insults to put each other down. I couldn’t get away from it. In our neighborhood, which was almost all Catholic, both Irish and Italian, there was a huge Catholic church called The Immaculate Conception. Because of all the anti-Semitism I experienced, I was even afraid of the church building itself. While passing the church one day, I peered into the open door. Upon seeing a man hanging on a giant cross, I was scared to death! From that day forward, I crossed the street to walk by.

When I was about 14 years old, I was invited to eat dinner at a friend’s house. I was at their table feeling a tad uncomfortable to begin with because I didn’t really know the family that well. They lived in the Bronx where the houses were so close to each other that you could stick your hand out and touch the next one. It was summertime. The windows were open and the neighbor next door was talking rather loudly. All of a sudden my friend’s sister yelled, “Tell that Jew bastard next door to shut up!” I was mortified. I remember feeling sick to my stomach.

First of all, I was not only embarrassed for myself, but embarrassed for my friend’s sister as well. I thought I should say something, but as a young boy in a situation like this, I was too timid. I just didn’t know what to say or how to say it.

My friend piped in, “You know, Greg is Jewish.”
His sister replied, “Well, he’s not that kind of a Jew.”

To this day, I’m not sure what that statement means. I guess she was trying to smooth things over by letting me know I am a clean Jew as opposed to a dirty Jew.
I experienced more than just verbal anti-Semitism. Four of us Jewish boys would carpool together in a taxi to go from our project to our synagogue for Hebrew school. We couldn’t walk because we went late in the day when it wasn’t safe. In the late fall, it was nearing darkness when we left. We went every Tuesday and Thursday. Many times, when we arrived, the neighborhood kids would be waiting for us and would throw rocks at us when we got out of the taxi.

At Hebrew school, they taught us that Jewish people were chosen by God. I never understood how we could be God’s chosen people and yet endure such intense, frequent and long-lasting worldwide persecution. I do understand being chosen now.

My mother was staunchly against racial prejudice. Both my parents were adamantly against any kind of bias or judgment based on a person’s skin color or religious persuasion. I am so very thankful that we were taught that under the skin we are all the same and that there is only one race, the human one. I believe with all my heart that prejudice is something we acquire, not something innate in us. My sisters and I were taught to be loving and accepting as opposed to hateful and intolerant. I believe this was ingrained in my parents from Jewish thought as the Lord tells us in the Torah not to treat anyone as an alien because we, the Jewish people, were once strangers in Egypt.

I do not want to appear like I have a high sensitivity towards anti-Semitism, but truth be told, I experienced my fair share. You see, I look quite Mediterranean with dark skin, dark eyes and dark hair. (Well, that is, when I had hair as a young man.) I would be over at a friend’s house, and I would hear anti-Semitic comments. When the person would find out I was Jewish, they would always say, “You don’t look Jewish”, instead of saying, “I’m terribly sorry for my ignorant comments.” But I guess if they knew their comments were derogatory, they would not have made them in the first place.
I found people feel it’s all right to make comments like “you cheap Jew”, or “let’s try to ‘Jew’ them down”. When people say, “Hey, we’ve got bagels for you, Rabbi,” it doesn’t feel loving. Recently, when I was taking a group from Georgia on a pilgrimage to Israel, one of the ladies on the trip showed me a piece of jewelry she purchased, and proclaimed proudly to all nearby that she had “Jewed down” the merchant. She had no idea that her comment was inappropriate. Go figure. These statements are hurtful at best and those who use them should come to grips that they have some prejudiced attitudes.

There’s an old saying, “Misunderstanding leads to all kinds of evil.” Where do people get the idea that the Jews are trying to take over the world? When did Israel ever try such a thing? People need to stop and think about what they are saying. They need to check the facts and find out the truth.

I remember hearing all these kinds of comments fairly regularly, and yet I was never brave enough to stand up and correct people. Now I do. (Privately, I gently corrected the lady on the pilgrimage mentioned above.) I now know that anti-Semitism is of the anti-Christ and the Lord hates it as well, as He calls the Jewish people, “the apple of His eye.”

Growing up, I felt as though there was nothing special about being Jewish. In fact, I felt somewhat cursed at times, as it appeared that the world did not have a high regard for the Jewish people or the nation of Israel. What a shame when, in fact, this rather small group of people has provided the world with so many blessings.

By the time I was 18, I was done being Jewish. I wouldn’t even give my last name in order to avoid the potential onslaught of derogatory comments that could follow. I just introduced myself as Greg. Today I realize that my enemy does not have a Social Security number. The real enemy is Satan himself. Anti-Semitism, for the most part, is born out of ignorance. Yet for the Christian community, this should never be.
My Bar Mitzvah and Synagogue

I was raised in an Orthodox synagogue called "Anshe Emet," which translates in English as "People of Truth." Although Congregation Anshe Emet was Orthodox, my family would be considered more along the Conservative/Reformed ranks. Sometimes, a person's daily religious practices do not always reflect what they do on Saturday or Sunday.

We did, however, abide by the Orthodox practice of walking the ten blocks to our little broken-down synagogue every Shabbat (Saturday). I went to Hebrew School there two times a week after my full day at public school. I do not have fond memories of Hebrew School. I actually hated it.

Shabbat at home was fairly nonexistent. You see, we were not really Orthodox in practice. My mother was raised Orthodox, and for the most part we just followed suit. I believe our faith, or lack thereof, was more cultural than spiritual. "Faith" was more something that happened on the outside than the inside for us. It was more about outward ritual than inward reality. I don't really know whom to blame, but the bottom line is you can know all about someone and never know who they really are.

We attended synagogue because we felt it was important to keep the traditions of past generations alive. Truth be told, we were going out of obligation and not out of desire. We followed rules as we knew nothing about relationship, or shall I say relating to God.
By the same token, God was not at the center of our lives. We knew about Him, and we had a respect for Him, but there was no “real” relationship with Him. I learned more about external religious ritual rather than internal relational reality. I had this horrible image of God. I had envisioned Him as being totally unapproachable, and as just waiting for me to mess up so He could let me have it. What a distorted and twisted way of looking at a God who in the book of Exodus says, “I have heard your cry and I am coming to your rescue.” Sadly enough, this was not my family’s revelation.

Who knew that God desired intimacy with His people? Who knew that we could speak to God and He would speak back to us? Who knew that God wants to be intimately involved with us so much so that He wants us to call Him Abba, Daddy? Well, I know this to be true now, and I will never ever let go of this revelation. I will never, ever let anyone or anything get in the way of my relationship with God ever again.

I remember my days leading up to my Bar Mitzvah all too well. You see, when you attend an Orthodox synagogue you are expected to recite not only your Haftorah (the prophetic portion of the weekly Scripture reading that aligns with your thirteenth birthday), but many of the Shabbat morning prayers along with their respective melodies. This took years to learn. It was burdensome and at times overwhelm-
ing. I was trying to do well in school and play some extra-curricular activities, so Hebrew School two times a week just didn't fit into my schedule. I begged my parents to give me a pass on my Bar Mitzvah, but this was taboo, according to our traditions.

Although I really didn't understand the reason for the Bar Mitzvah I still had to go through with it. Anything less was out of the question. I remember crying ferociously in the rabbi's office, with my mother in attendance, as the rabbi said this was the way it was and there was no room for debate or discussion.

So every day, about a year out from my Bar Mitzvah, I listened to the cassette tape that the rabbi made for me with the chanting of the Haftorah Portion along with the melody until I had it down pat. I knew all the prayers and read the Hebrew very well when the day came.

I really do not want to say anything derogatory about my rabbi growing up, but let's just say he was no game show host. He was quite serious. I never remember him smiling. In fact, I never saw his teeth, except once at a men's meeting when I saw him biting into a bagel with cream cheese and lox. He did not appear to be a happy man, but then again maybe I was just so unhappy being there that I brought the worst out of him. Perhaps it was also because he knew that my parents were not really living the Orthodox lifestyle.
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