

## INTRODUCTION

### *Parkchester and New York City's History*

PARKCHESTER HAS BEEN HOME OVER THE PAST eight decades to tens of thousands of aspiring working- and lower-middle-class men and women. Amid an expanse of 129 acres of land situated in the East Bronx, its 12,271 apartments in 171 buildings, some rising as high as thirteen stories, are readily visible to motorists as their cars speed or crawl on the Cross Bronx Expressway eastbound toward the northernmost reaches of the borough or out to Queens or westbound toward New Jersey. No matter their direction, drivers are on the road to suburbia. This enclave has often been referred to as “a city within a city” by its founders, tenants, and the media since the day it opened with some fanfare in the early spring of 1940. Back then, its scale was compared to that of New Brunswick, New Jersey, or Bangor, Maine, except that Parkchester was even larger.<sup>1</sup>

Parkchester is a short subway ride from Manhattan—what its residents call the “city”—convenient for the army of civil servants, garment workers, salespeople, and small business owners who have daily marched together down Metropolitan Avenue, the area’s main thoroughfare, to the 177th Street/Parkchester local and express stop at Hugh J. Grant Circle. Straphangers awaiting their trains at this elevated subway station have, for generations, looked down upon the bumper-to-bumper traffic, the onerous workday lot of suburban commuters.

In its early decades, this planned community—owned and operated by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Corporation (MLIC)—welcomed in, after a close investigation of applicants’ behavioral and economic backgrounds, Irish Catholics (Parkchester’s largest white ethnic group), many Italian Catholics, a minority of Protestants, and a substantial number of Jews. All felt fortunate to have secured a spot in the community. The management expected those “of any nationality and religion” whom they “carefully selected” would “fit into the Bronx as easily as Parkchester’s street numbers.” But during the new neighborhood’s first thirty years, an egregious blot stained management’s vetting process. Almost no blacks or Latinos were allowed to settle there.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with the tenor of those times, in the 1940s and early 1950s the MLIC relied on the laws and the courts to maintain segregation. Subsequently, even when civil rights legislation was on the books, rental agents and the home office back in Manhattan used a variety of tactical subterfuges to forestall integration. While the chairman of the MLIC went on the record in 1943 to assert that “Negroes and whites don’t mix,” the company never admitted publicly that it, in fact, practiced institutionalized racism. Integration was not part of company chairman Frederick H. Ecker’s “pet business and sociological dream.” If anything, he and other officials frequently asserted that blacks were not among its more than forty thousand residents because they were not interested in living there. Those applicants who were turned away or steered away because of their race knew better. So did their advocates within and without the civil rights movement who struggled to break down the walls of racism in housing, often with no assistance from the municipal government.<sup>3</sup>

Starting late in the 1960s, the stain of segregation was finally removed from the neighborhood’s buildings. Since the 1990s, community residents have been predominantly black or Latino, with a

significant and growing population that hails from Asia, Africa, and South America. The whites who live in early-21st-century Parkchester are mostly elderly Christians; almost no Jews remain. One of Parkchester's former synagogues is now a mosque, one of the six Muslim places of worship that ring the community.

Over the decades, the neighborhood has been perceived as an idyllic setting. It is a place that folks of many backgrounds have wanted to be part of and it has been a source of frustration for those who were systematically excluded. Residents have largely been pleased to live in a bucolic environment within city limits replete with flowers, gardens, and well-kept playgrounds. The neighborhood's signature place is its magnificent Metropolitan Oval, situated in the very heart of the complex. This is the spot where, in summertime, people have sat out in the shade on park benches and admired the beautifully landscaped area while catching breezes from the sculpture fountain. During holiday seasons, passersby have admired both the Christmas stockings hung over a faux fireplace and the electric menorah on display, which also contributed to a sense that the residents lived in a peaceful preserve. Nonetheless, when tenants found themselves in disagreement with the management's policies, as tried and true New Yorkers, they made their complaints heard loud and clear. Indeed, the largest ball field was the site of many protest meetings. However, in the end, Parkchesterites have tacitly subscribed to a viewpoint that the MLIC articulated early in the development's existence. Unquestionably, from the 1940s through the 1960s, those who were admitted sincerely believed that they were better off than those who flocked to suburbia. Even beyond the daily commutation advantages of a subway whose fare until 1966 did not rise above twenty cents a ride, they liked the idea that they would not be obliged to rake leaves in the fall or shovel snow in the winter, not to mention arrive home late for dinner year-round after extricating themselves

from traffic jams. During the MLIC's tenure, scores of skilled maintenance employees were on the premises to handle householders' chores. These crack workers were at the beck and call of residents, ready to fix electrical and plumbing problems or even to help hang photographs and mirrors.

Proud of where they resided and how they lived, Parkchesterites have long taken umbrage and responded with a "Bronx cheer" to any suggestion that their red-bricked, high-rise development was a "project." Such city-owned operations, built throughout New York around the same time as Parkchester and following years, often with the same color exteriors and similar asphalt playgrounds, would be tarred with the reputation of being poorly constructed, inadequately maintained, and eventually rife with criminality. Parkchester tenants knew of these residential areas. A few were located just a few subway stops southwest of their neighborhood, literally on the wrong side of the tracks. Until the 1970s, the uncharitable in Parkchester might also say that that was where the unwanted African Americans and Latinos lived. Subsequently, the fearful, drawn from among all racial groups, frequently expressed deep concern that troublemakers from the projects might prey on their community.<sup>4</sup>

In opting for apartment life in a neighborhood better than most in their borough and city, Parkchester's first settlers forewent the possibility of owning their own homes outside of the city, a touchstone of the American dream in the post-World War II era. Rather, many saw themselves as renters for life. In fact, in the early 1970s, when the Helmsley-Spear corporation, which in 1968 bought the development from the MLIC, initially tendered the option of tenants owning their apartments, most families did not buy in. Many, fearful that as renters they might be pressured or forced to leave, contested the new managers' condominium initiative. In all events, at least for the neighborhood's first generation, the intention was

to stay put for the long haul within a generally salubrious setting in their home borough. In more recent times, there has been more movement in and out of the neighborhood. Still, notwithstanding critical issues that arose primarily with infrastructure as its buildings aged, problems that were laid at management's doorstep, Parkchester has retained its special character for generations. And, during the last two decades, residents have benefitted from a creature comfort that was not available to earlier tenants: their apartments are air-conditioned. When the neighborhood was built, the management did not address that structural imperfection. This crucial omission from the planned-community drawing boards was one of the reasons that the children of the first settlers looked elsewhere for housing once they reached their majority.

The story of choosing to live in Parkchester offers an alternative narrative to the oft-told tales of how long-time New Yorkers, almost all of whom were white, began exiting Gotham after 1945 for what was deemed a better life in suburbia, often also in segregated locales. This new East Bronx area—effectively for whites only—was a reasonable and affordable venue for those who were admitted. There they would raise their baby-boomer youngsters in what they deemed a special place in the city. During its first three decades, the community, with a robust spirit of neighborliness that prevailed among its young families, uncommon for an urban development of its dimensions, bore the nickname “Storkchester.”

Parkchester likewise tenders an additional important dimension to the subsequent history of middle class migration of varying racial and ethnic groups within and out of New York City from the late 1970s through the 1990s. It has been widely noted that amid the maelstroms of financial crises, cutbacks in city services, deterioration if not destruction of old inner-city neighborhoods, and a concomitant spike in criminality, middle class whites fled Gotham en masse. In so doing, they took part in a second distinct

era of movement toward suburbia. What took place in Parkchester complicates this narrative. This East Bronx enclave surely was not immune to the plights of the city; it too witnessed many older white residents and their children seek new homes out of town. But a now-integrated Parkchester simultaneously absorbed members of racial minority groups who fled into this relatively safe area without the violence and outcries that occurred in other parts of the city. The newcomers often came over from those “projects,” extricating themselves from the city’s more grievously afflicted areas. This aspect of the Parkchester story highlights the largely unrecognized phenomenon of African American and Latino flight *within* New York City to better areas of Gotham during this same troubled period.

In recent years, as the neighborhood increasingly has become home to a *mélange* of peoples from all over the globe, Parkchester’s newest residents have deepened New York’s cachet as an immigrant city, one of the proudest features of Gotham’s long history. In opting for the now highly diverse East Bronx neighborhood, those from Asia, Africa, and South America have eschewed newcomers’ generally presumed affinity for settling in substantially homogenous ethnic and national enclaves. Here and now, this community again limns the trail of groups moving within and without New York City.

Ultimately, however, Parkchester has been special not so much because people of varied and changing backgrounds, when they were permitted to reside there, chose to live in this neighborhood for similar reasons. Of far greater moment is that, for eighty years, those of diverse origins have generally lived together harmoniously. More often than not, Parkchester’s many religious, ethnic, racial, and national groups have gotten along. This uncommon behavior demands the closest consideration. To begin with, early in its history, convivial life in the community constituted a turning point in

interethnic relations in New York City, especially in the longtime contretemps between Irish Americans and Jews.

These groups' aggravated and sometimes violent history of conflict dates back to the close of the 19th century. As competing immigrants, they clashed over jobs, union memberships, housing, and frequently politics. One particular point of contention stemmed from the Irish perception, within downtown's congested and contested atmosphere, that they were losing control of the streets to Jews. One nasty way of getting even was to attack pushcart peddlers on East Broadway.

These tensions crescendoed exponentially in the decade or more of the Great Depression, during which Jews suffered economically but the Irish did even worse. In Gaelic neighborhoods, the word on the street, more than ever, was that the Jews were taking over civil service jobs, as police, firefighters, and teachers, that the Irish had maintained for generations.

Exacerbating matters, the rhetoric and organizations of Michigan-based radio preacher Father Charles Coughlin gave voice and action to local frustrations. His allegations about the supposed Jewish control of the American economy sat well with those who feared for their livelihoods. Members of Coughlin's Christian Front, and an even more violent group called the Christian Mobilizers, applied these teachings enthusiastically to the mean streets around them.

In the South Bronx, for example, 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 many 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>5</sup>

Significantly, these angers and actions did not carry over to Parkchester, even though a sizeable number of original tenants ac-

tually hailed from the South Bronx. No Irish street gangs attacked against Jewish youngsters. Anti-Semitism was not preached from Christian pulpits. Yet in this generally tolerant neighborhood there still were discernible limits to interreligious conviviality. Jews and Christians rarely counted one another as their closest friends, even if synagogue leaders were concerned about the maintenance of Jewish identification in this new heterogeneous setting where there were no readily identifiable ethnic markers. In any event, the way these groups behaved toward one another with forbearance set their multiple-faith community apart from many other neighborhoods in the city.

Similarly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Parkchester was finally integrated, the issue of race was roiling New York City and soiling the air all over its five boroughs. During this time of turmoil, there was in Parkchester some naysaying about integrated housing in line with the racist position that the MLIC had long maintained. This black mark on the community's history did not completely disappear. Indeed, incidents of nasty pushback from some white tenants about African Americans and Latinos residing in their buildings did occur. Still, while it is impossible to tease out what whites said privately to one another when previously excluded groups moved in, the change in the populace's coloration occurred without significant public discussion, rancor, or dispute. Nor was there an immediate mass flight of residents out of Parkchester. For the most part, the races lived among one another, in their initial encounters, without visible strife but also without much expression of the possible social and cultural bounties of integration. Even more notably, a few years later, when the neighborhood's own rapidly aging buildings began to break down and criminality seeped into the area, the onus of what was going wrong was not laid on the newest residents. In many other locales, acute urban problems led to social conflict and even violence. Here again, the Parkchester ex-

perience stood apart. Understanding why and how Parkchesterites have lived their lives as they have and what their encounters with each other and with the surrounding city have been is the key objective of this study.

This history of Parkchester identifies the factors that have made this Bronx neighborhood attractive to successive groups of residents as its mostly working-class families for the most part found ways to live harmoniously. It explores the dynamics of white, black, Latino, and new immigrant movement within and without the city and offers a nuanced examination of interethnic and interracial relations in Gotham over the past eighty years.

Our eight-decade-long story begins with a delineation of how Parkchester's founders successfully planned and created an imposing, affordable, and sustainable apartment neighborhood on virgin land in the East Bronx for white working- and middle-class families who, even before World War II, were contemplating suburban migration. There follows a discussion of the ethnic and religious range of the first residents who were fortunate enough to have passed the MLIC's vetting, as well as the efforts to establish religious institutions that would serve the neighborhood.

The lived lives of parents and their many children during its Storkchester era of the 1940s–1960s is the next consideration, as well as how Parkchester's people came together as neighbors, and often as friends, during World War II and in the first postwar decades. Here due attention is accorded to the behavior of some less-than-docile women tenants who organized those on their floors and in their buildings to protest so-called “voluntary” rent hikes. They also had their say about the controlling behavior of the MLIC through its unarmed but uniformed “Parkchester cops,” who were hired to keep adults and children walking the straight and narrow on the development's streets. These officers were credited with helping to prevent the youth gangs that were so common elsewhere

in the borough and city in the 1950s from either forming or invading their turf. But many parents were decidedly unhappy when their own children received summons for victimless bad behavior, such as picking flowers out of Metropolitan Oval's gardens, and when they were threatened with eviction because of their youngsters' minor malfeasances.

The issue of race in Parkchester takes center stage as the long road from segregation to integration is traversed. The coy statements and diversionary actions of MLIC's leaders designed to keep the neighborhood all white, within and then in violation of the law, are presented within the contexts of their times, as are the strategies that civil rights advocates used to open up this Bronx preserve. Collaterally, a sense is offered of how Parkchester's white Christians and Jews felt, though they did not say much publicly, about the status quo that the owners worked hard to maintain. Very late in the 1960s, the first non-whites entered Parkchester. Where they hailed from, why they chose Parkchester, and the mixed reception they received from established white residents is then explored.

The focus then turns back to tenant-owner relationships, with an examination of the disputatious episodes that took place during the three decades of the Helmsleys' control over the neighborhood. The combination of the Helmsleys' poor judgments, the problems of the city during their tenure that were beyond their control, and ultimately the corporation's neglect of Parkchester's infrastructure, which frequently brought the owners to grief with residents, are explained. Then follows an examination of how a new cohort of socially responsible urban redevelopers, beginning in the mid-1990s, took over the property from Helmsley-Spear and renewed the neighborhood.

Bringing the history of Parkchester up to the present day, the final chapters draw attention to the lived lives and efforts at integration of the neighborhood's contemporary racial, ethnic, and na-

tional residents, in all their diversity, while finishing the story of the aging of Parkchester's former majority: its elderly white Christians and Jews.

The book concludes with a discussion of and personal reflection on the theme that informs so much of this eighty-year neighborhood history: the special get-along spirit that has pervaded community life over generations and within an ever-changing array of group encounters.