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Essay by Ronnie Hess

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The night my family moved downtown from a one-bedroom flat in Washington Heights to a two-bedroom railroad apartment on East 96th Street in New York City, my father worried he had made a terrible mistake.

Or so he told me years later. In 1945, as he lay awake listening to the rattle of the Third Avenue El half a block from our new home in a four-story brownstone, he regretted the quiet and security of the area we'd left behind—down the hill from the Cloisters and the leafy walks of Fort Tryon Park along the Hudson River. What had he done?

We'd pulled up roots to be closer to the 92nd Street Y, where my sister could take modern dance lessons. She was three, her lithe body clearly that of a dancer. I was just a few weeks old, obviously too young to remember the old neighborhood, although after the move we often visited old friends uptown—Uncle Hans and Auntie Rosie and their children, not real relations but, like my father, people from the Old Country, specifically Germany, people who knew about displacement, war, genocide, and loss.

But once we'd moved to the northern edge of Yorkville on the Upper East Side—a place of various ethnicities, races, and religions—it came to shape and define me rather than our former Jewish émigré neighborhood.

The El, or elevated train, was the last of several railway lines that had been built above ground in Manhattan. At the time, the hulking girders and latticework of overhead tracks dominated the street and shut out the sunlight. And since the trains going uptown and downtown passed by every few minutes, there was always clatter and noise.

We lived on the fringes of Harlem between Lexington and Third Avenues, a busy shopping neighborhood. There was a candy store immediately next door to us, run by an oversize woman and her diminutive husband. I was told to steer clear of the bar at the corner as well as the big boys—greasers—from the technical school down the block who paraded up the street three or four abreast when school let out. My mother once told me she'd give me five minutes to run to the newsstand and back to get the paper. More than that, and she'd call the police.

The neighborhood then seemed fluid, unpredictable—as much the rag-and-bone man riding through the early-morning streets in his horse-drawn cart as the hurdy-gurdy man as the knife-grinder as Latino music drifting from open car windows as an Irish neighbor calling “Theresa” across the backyard.

My mother and I went grocery shopping on Third Avenue between 96th and 95th Streets—to the butcher, German and Austrian bakers, and a poultry man whose storefront shop was just unfinished floors and wooden crates filled with feathers as well as eggs. I was allowed to take my father's shirts to the Chinese laundryman, reminding him each time, “No starch, please.”

Everyone seemed to have an accent, including us—my father's German, my mother's English. Our parents sent my sister and me to a French private school, but that's another story.

Within the neighborhood, there were borders and streets that we knew as children not to cross. When we traveled on the El with my father, we got off at the 99th Street stop while my mother preferred the 89th Street station. There was an implicit demarcation line—96th Street—that divided Yorkville (not dangerous) from Spanish Harlem (possibly dangerous). I learned early that race and gender made a difference in how you negotiated the city. My father, who was tall and muscular, thought he was strong enough to protect his girls as we walked the three blocks home, while my mother made us trek a little farther, playing it safe.

Our housekeeper Esther, along with her husband Joe, lived in a small apartment directly on Third Avenue. When I visited them, I could look out the window and watch the trains go by, even see the faces of the straphangers as they lurched their way north.

While my father recoiled at the El's clatter, I accepted the noise along with the other music of the neighborhood. But at Esther's, I came to realize we were not the kind of people who lived where windows faced an el, and how class and money, or the lack of it, could determine your address.

Wealth and power could uproot an entire neighborhood. Pressure from real-estate interests, as well as political and social reformers, changed the attitude toward the elevated railways, which were soon labeled a blight on the urban landscape. Fresh air and light were the ticket, but also new high-rises and higher property values, not to mention rents.

One late afternoon—May 12, 1955—my father and I craned our necks from our front window to see the last train speed by, its passengers waving white handkerchiefs in adieu as the Manhattan part of the line closed. (The Bronx El section closed in 1973.) Two-and-a-half years later, we were gone, too—relocated to the Upper West Side to a large apartment building with elevators and doormen.

In the beginning, the new flat strained the family budget, forcing my father to borrow money from my aunt. Ultimately, it signified my immigrant parents' move up the socioeconomic ladder. That fall, I'd ride past our old house on the way to school each morning, measuring from my seat on the Crosstown bus the progress of the demolition work.

I could see into our old apartment through the wide holes in the building's exterior walls—my bedroom, mutilated and crumbling; even my sister's and my last drawings, made in crayon and lipstick, with permission from my mother in the apartment's final days. I watched each day, until everything, save for one tall building in the middle of the block with doctors' offices on the first floor, was rubble and dust.

"Displacement will be the problem of the twenty-first century, more wrenching and more injurious to the human spirit than even the color line," writes Columbia professor and psychiatrist Mindy Thompson Fullilove in *The House of Joshua*, her 1999 personal account of family and place. It's a sentence that seems more prescient and haunting than I ever imagined when I first read her book ten years ago. For refugees across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa—or along the borders between the US and Mexico—home doesn't necessarily imply stasis, although it often can. Home has become increasingly threatened and abandoned.

What do we do when we lose community, the difficult-to-define environment that gives us a sense of well-being? The comfort and security, the familiar sounds and smells?

When my family moved away from Yorkville on the East Side, we left behind the people, the shops, the cultural markers I'd known and loved from childhood but found I couldn't go back to. The anomie, isolation, and mutability of the city took over—we scarcely knew our neighbors on the West Side—and, along with this, a sense that home at best was unstable, dependent only on our parents being there.

For years afterward, especially when I went off to college and moved frequently, I thought about the meaning of home, trying to recreate in my mind the particularities of our East Side apartment. I was sure I would never find that elusive place again or be able to build another for myself.

Publishing Information

- "[60 Years After Its Demise, Rare Videos Reveal Third Avenue Elevated Line](#) [5]" by Lou Lumenick, *New York Post* (January 16, 2015).
- "[When Manhattan Had Elevated Trains](#) [6]" by Vincent Valk, *CityLab* (December 22, 2016).
- *The House of Joshua: Meditations on Family and Place* by Mindy Thompson Fullilove (University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

Art Information

- "[Looking Downtown from the Third Avenue Elevated Railway in the 'Fifties'](#) [7]" by Marjory Collins; Library of Congress; public domain.



Ronnie Hess, journalist and poet, began her broadcasting career at Wisconsin Public Radio. In the 1980s, she was a reporter/producer for CBS News in New York and Paris, before returning to public radio in the Twin Cities and Chicago.

She's the author of five poetry chapbooks and two award-winning culinary travel guides: *Eat Smart in France* (2010) and *Eat Smart in Portugal* (with Joan Peterson, 2017). She lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Here's what Ronnie told us by email about her essay:

Several years ago, I took a course about writing women's lives as memoirs, meditations, even biomythologies. One of the assignments was to write, in a few paragraphs, a personal narrative of place. The class had read Mindy T. Fullilove's book *The House of Joshua*, and I was much affected by it. It stayed with me, even as seasons and events changed, especially those dealing with migration and refugees. Last year, I went back and expanded the essay and was surprised in the writing to see the distance I had traveled, how much more there was to say.

For more information, see [Ronnie Hess's website](#) [8].

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