

# THE BATTLE OF PARKCHESTER

*Story of the gallant fight against Jimcrow at a Metropolitan housing project. Broad unity was achieved and the struggle will be carried on*

*By Elihu S. Hicks*

ON May 5, 1939, the daily newspapers in New York carried two news stories, seemingly unrelated except that they both dealt with housing. One, with a Berlin dateline, told of a new law issued by the nazis prohibiting Jews and "Aryans" from occupying the same houses.

The law provided:

"Jews cannot claim legal protection [granted by law to tenants of small apartments] against notice to vacate, unless the landlords are also Jewish, provided the landlord can prove that other accommodations are available for the tenant.

"Leases with Jews may be terminated on short notice if other accommodations are available.

"Jews may sublet only to Jews. Permission of the landlord is not required if he also is a Jew.

"Jews must admit other Jews, as tenants or sub-tenants upon request of local authorities.

"Vacant apartments or rooms may be rented by Jews only with the permission of local authorities."

(*The Black Book*, published by the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, U.S.S.R., Vaad Leumi, Palestine, and the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists, and Scientists, p. 507.)

The second item announced that a scale model of a 12,000 unit housing development being erected by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in the Bronx, was to be shown at the New York World's Fair. The project, to be built on the site of the old New York Catholic Proctory, was to be called "Parkchester." Frederick H. Ecker, chairman of the board of Metropolitan, bubbled with enthusiasm as he described the 66,000 windows of the project, which would look down on beautifully landscaped gardens and parks. Parkchester was to be a city in itself with a population of more than 40,000.

Less than a year later, on February 28, 1940, the papers carried two more articles. Hitler's armies were preparing for a Spring "*Blitzkrieg*" which the generals said would bring victory to the Third Reich. And in the Bronx, several hundred happy families were moving into the newly completed sections of Parkchester.

Today Hitler's name is but a bad memory. His armies, his "*Kampf*" and his racist laws went down to total defeat under the heels of freedom-loving humanity. One soldier

in the United States Army which helped bring that defeat about, was Michael Decatur, a Negro.

Parkchester's red brick walls have become commonplace to the people of East Bronx. Its 66,000 windows are no longer the subject of awesome comment, having been overshadowed by newer and larger housing projects which sprang up after the war. But Parkchester is still very much a subject of conversation—not only for Bronxites, but for millions of New Yorkers. It has become a symbolic fortress, a symbol of the racism and hate which was Hitler's stock-in-trade.

## *An Eviction at Parkchester*

On May 20, thousands of Parkchester residents watched a city marshal and his assistants, aided by an army of uniformed and plainclothes policemen carry the furniture and other belongings of a family of four down to the street and load them into a city-leased moving van. A young mother followed the marshal's men to the street and met the cheers of her neighbors with a sad but firm smile. She was Mrs. Sophie Decatur, whose family had been the only Negro family ever to live in the giant development. Together with her husband Michael, now a dining car worker on the Atlantic Coast Lines railroad, and their two children Michael, Jr., one, and Michelle, five, Mrs. Decatur moved into the project last July as the guest of a young white tenant, Mrs. Priscilla Simon. Mrs. Simon, who was to be married, moved to another apartment, sub-letting her Parkchester apartment to the Decatur, thus putting a temporary crack in the 13 year Jimcrow wall.

Ecker, who had gone into rhapsodies about the gardens and parks and 66,000 windows, had also declared before the New York Board of Estimate on June 3, 1943: "Negroes and whites don't mix. Perhaps they will a hundred years from now but they don't now." And so, as soon as the company found that the Decatur had moved in, it started a campaign of harassment and legalistic maneuvers to have them evicted.

## *The Battle Begins*

A twenty-four hour guard was placed over the Decatur's apartment for two and a half months. Two weeks after the family had moved in, Metropolitan notified them that they

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17



*The Decatur family: Mr. Michael Decatur, Mrs. Sophie Decatur, and their son Michael, Jr. and daughter Michelle.*

were "illegal sub-tenants" and that they would have to move. By mid-September both Mrs. Simon and the Decaturs had been served with eviction notices. But Mrs. Decatur, a former fur worker and member of Furriers Union Local 80, and her husband were determined to fight for their rights as Americans. They knew that there were many sub-tenants living unmolested in Parkchester and that Metropolitan was attempting to evict them only because they were Negroes.

The Decaturs were not alone in the fight, which was soon to be known as "The Battle of Parkchester." Three years before the Decatur family moved into the project, 150 Parkchester and other Bronx residents had met and formed a Committee to End Discrimination in Parkchester.

Speakers at the initiating meeting were former Congressman Leo Isacson; Isadore Blumberg, then chairman of the New York Tenants Council, and William L. Patterson, executive secretary of the Civil Rights Congress. The meeting demanded, in a unanimously adopted resolution, that Metropolitan "rent the next vacant apartment [in Parkchester] to a Negro family and continue renting to Negro families in appreciable numbers." The resolution pointed out that "millions of Negroes contribute through their life insurance policies to the Metropolitan Life's huge profits, which in turn have made Parkchester as well as Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village possible, yet these projects ban Negroes."

The fight at Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village began in 1943 when Communist City Councilman Benjamin J. Davis challenged the granting of a 75 million dollar city subsidy for the proposed Jimcrow projects. It continued through the courts and on picket lines and delegations for eight years until, on January 20, 1952, Metropolitan dropped eviction proceedings against 19 white tenants and agreed to rent an apartment to Mr. and Mrs. Hardine Hendrix and their son. The victorious Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper struggle drove the first wedge in Metropolitan's segre-

gation policy. It proved that the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, with all its 11 billion dollars, could be beaten.

### ***Broad Unity Is Achieved***

The committee immediately took up the fight to keep the Decaturs in Parkchester and win apartments there for Negroes on an equal basis with whites. Later expanding into a Bronx-wide Committee for Integrated Housing, the committee distributed more than 150,000 leaflets attacking Metropolitan's Jimcrow renting policies. Picket lines were formed around Metropolitan offices and delegations visited various company officials. It was during one of these visits that Parkchester manager, Douglas Lowe, was quoted as declaring, "We never have and we never will rent apartments to Negroes." Lowe later denied having said this but the fact remained and the company continued its campaign to evict the Decaturs.

The issues were so clear that leaders and organizations of widely separated political shadings and social views were impelled to speak out. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell sharply challenged Metropolitan's contention that there was "no discrimination involved" in the case. The Jewish War Veterans at their Bronx County convention in April issued a statement condemning Parkchester Jimcrow as a blight on the democracy they had fought to preserve.

Trade unions—AFL, CIO, and Independent—took up the fight as labor's own. Sam Goldstein, president of United Auto Workers (AFL) Local 995 spoke out as did leaders of the Furriers, the Independent United Electrical Workers, CIO Barbers and Beauty Culturists and others.

Oscar Hammerstein the musician, Jackie Robinson the ballplayer, Langston Hughes the poet and author, Hon. Hubert T. Delaney, a Domestic Relations Court Judge, Algernon Black the ethical culturist, all of these and many more mingled their voices with those of the Decaturs and the committee.

The Bronx branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a number of newspapers joined in the fight. Last March, the NAACP branch sent Ecker a letter protesting Metropolitan bias. Signed by attorney Oliver Eastman, president of the branch, and the Reverend Arnold Hearn, pastor of the St. Luke's Methodist Church and branch treasurer, the letter asked:

"Are you waiting to accept inevitable change until such time as a spontaneous boycott of Metropolitan's insurance enterprises, born of righteous revulsion on the part of men of good will, shall force by economic pressure what you have thus far refused to do for the sake of common decency? You slander the people of Parkchester if you maintain they are incapable of accepting Negroes as neighbors."

And so the battle raged. Repeated pleas to Francis Cardinal Spellman to use his good offices to impose decency in the predominantly Catholic project went unanswered. Finally a Municipal Court—seldom known to support tenant over landlord—ordered the Decaturs evicted.

## Skirmish at the Metropolitan

The day before the eviction Mrs. Decatur and six other Negro and white Bronx mothers went to the offices of Metropolitan third vice-president Frank Love (brother of we-never-have-and-never-will-rent-to-Negroes—Douglas Lowe) to demand a statement of policy. The women sat in the 28th floor Metropolitan Tower office of the official for five hours before Lowe and company attorney Alfred Carb agreed to confer with them. In a prepared statement addressed to Lowe, the women had said that they would not leave the office until they had gotten some assurance that discrimination in Parkchester would be abandoned.

Lowe listened to the women for more than an hour. He refused to say a word, leaving that to Carb, who heaped platitudes upon generalities and said what amounted to the fact that Metropolitan was "studying the problem." Finally convinced that the company's policy of Jimcrow had not been changed, the women made a dramatic move. Taking steel chains and padlocks from their purses, they chained themselves to their chairs and the office window and told the astonished Lowe and Carb that they would continue sitting until they got some satisfaction.

That was about six o'clock in the evening. Talking quietly among themselves about home and their children, the heroic mothers sat until after three the next morning. Lowe and Carb stayed in the offices, arrogantly announcing their intention of out-waiting the women. Lowe ordered the guards down in the lobby to prevent anyone from coming into the building to bring food to the women. Having heard that one of the mothers was pregnant, he knew that they could not remain chained in the office forever.

When they finally left, however, the six determined women had dealt the biggest company in the world a telling blow, for the radio, television and newspapers were forced to tell the world the next day some of the uncomplimentary facts about Metropolitan Life.

## The War Against Jimcrow Goes On

Hours before the evicting marshal was scheduled to appear on the morning of May 20, the Decatur apartment began to fill with Bronxites who know that democracy is meaningless unless it includes all people. There were Negro and white, Catholic and Protestant women and Jewish housewives, some with their children, some tenants in Parkchester and others from the area nearby. There were young men, students, factory workers, a small businessman. As the time grew near, the apartment was packed solid with at least 70 people, determined to fight the eviction to the last minute.

When the marshal arrived, escorted by almost 100 burly cops, he found the Decatur door securely bolted and locked. A pass-key failed to open the steel door, and a sledgehammer was sent for. After wrecking the door, he pushed it open and found a wall of determined people, arms intertwined.

The cops, on the signal of a superior, plunged into the apartment, fists flying. In a few minutes they had slugged, pushed and dragged almost everyone out and down the stairs. Only Mrs. Decatur remained, calmly and pensively gathering up some of the smaller things. Mr. Decatur, who was out on the road working, would return to find his family staying with friends nearby.

Though the Decaturs have been evicted, the "Battle of Parkchester" is far from over. Mrs. Decatur put it this way: "The fight is now on a new, higher level. It has left the narrow channel of the Decaturs' personal case and the legalistic issue of whether or not we had a right to sublet the apartment. "Now the issue of discrimination in Parkchester must be fought boldly."

The Bronx NAACP, the Bronx-wide Committee for Integrated Housing, various tenants councils, ministers, rabbis and thousands of plain people who believe that "all men are created equal," have pledged themselves to take part in the growing campaign to smash Jimcrow at Parkchester.

Frederick Ecker, the Lowe Brothers and the other Metropolitan millionaires can resign themselves to the fact that their "law" that Negroes and whites "don't mix" will go into the same scrap heap as did Hitler's law, announced to the world on that May day in 1939 when Parkchester was just a scale model.



**ABRAHAM OLKIN**

*Died May 18, 1953*

**W**ITH the passing of Abraham Olkin on May 18 in Los Angeles, the Jewish progressive movement lost a devoted, clear-headed and beloved leader. Olkin was born in Russia 52 years ago and came to this country in 1910 at the age of nine. He entered the workers' movement at an early age and devoted his entire life to it. He held leading posts successively as secretary of "Icor," as the first national secretary of Ikuf and finally as the *Morning Freiheit* manager in Philadelphia and in Los Angeles. The editors of *Jewish Life* deeply mourn his loss.