

A Summer's Tale

Defeating prejudice in a bungalow colony

By *BABETTE JONES*

THIS is a story about prejudice. It has a happy ending but it is not a happy story. It is a story about Jews and Negroes . . . progressive Jews and progressive Negroes, and the lessons they learned in building an interracial community. It is a true story. I know, because it happened to me.

Somewhere in a neighboring county, there is a small resort community. It was founded by progressive, non-religious Jews about 30 years ago and in the beginning was a cooperative. It is still a membership association, retaining both some of its cooperative flavor and a great deal of its progressive tradition. Because it is a membership association, prospective homeowners must be elected to membership by a vote of the community at an annual meeting before any property is sold.

The people who own homes there are good people: men and women who have given years to the struggle for a better world; who have tasted the bitter fruit of anti-Semitism; who have worked in the factories of New York and over the years have managed to save enough money to build these simple houses, many still unfinished. If anyone accused them of bigotry, they would be shocked; they believe in the principles of integration and equality,

and many of them have children who walked on the picket lines at Woolworth's.

But they were not immune to the insidious virus of prejudice; undiagnosed and untreated, it spread until almost the entire community was infected.

My husband is a Negro. I am a Jew. We decided to buy a home and we chose that community. It was not a choice based on any great principle. We had visited friends there and we liked what we saw. The people were friendly; the houses were comfortable; the recreational facilities good. We had been made to feel welcome not only by our friends but by their neighbors. And we had been looking for a house for a long time.

But overnight the virus took hold. The same people who had raised money for progressive causes worried about the "decrease in property values" that our coming would bring. Those whose sons and daughters had walked to support the Southern students worried about "the example an interracial couple will set for our children." Those who had so gallantly fought in support of Paul Robeson's right to sing saw their community becoming "another Peekskill."

Men and women who had spoken



Two boys at the Summer Play School, Queensview Cooperative Housing Enterprise, Queens, N. Y.

from soap boxes on the lower East Side 40 years ago worried about "being trailblazers," and argued: "We are too old to change. We should spend the remaining few years of our lives with those who have the same cultural traditions as we." No one said "we don't believe in integration; we don't want Negroes."

As the Labor Day membership meeting drew near, the issue was joined and the fight got rough. Rumors began to fly; name-calling started; neighbor stopped talking to neighbor; some threatened to sell their homes, and it began to look as if the disease might be fatal. But we overlooked one factor: not everyone was sick.

Some remained healthy and fought back. The great writings of Peretz and Sholem Aleichem were taken from the shelves and read aloud at meetings; articles from the most "respectible" publications of alumni societies and of Madison Avenue were quoted; Saturday night socials were turned into discussion groups and the medicine began to take effect.

The most wonderful part of the recuperation was the realization that the virus had not affected the children. Much later, we learned that a group of pre-teenagers, aware of the conflict

of their parents, had held a meeting and decided that they could be a constructive influence. And they were.

One little boy, whose father and mother were among the leaders of the "anti-" group, became a steady companion to my husband. He insisted that his father "come meet my best friend."

In the end, at the membership meeting that would decide the issue, the children came, sat together and watched to see how their parents would vote. They had never been taught prejudice and couldn't understand it now. And even those parents—their teachers—most determined to prevent us from buying a house there could not vote against us with their children looking on.

So we "won." We bought the house, and are now living in it. We are friendly with our neighbors. There is no one there who does not talk to us. We expect to spend many happy years there and to make many fast friends. True, there are some who cannot look into my husband's eyes when they speak to him, but they do speak. For we have all learned from this bitter summer.

During the months of conflict, my husband and I made a point of greeting everyone. We never accused anyone of bigotry; we simply answered each argument as it was presented, and we placed our faith in the inherent decency of these people who succumbed to the pernicious atmosphere of white supremacy. We believed (and practiced our belief) that you can't fight prejudice with prejudice.

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