

A GREAT JEWISH BRONX TALE

Article contributed by Jane Niedelman

The South Bronx in 1950 was the home of a large and thriving community, predominantly Jewish. In the 1950's The Bronx offered synagogues, mikvas, kosher bakeries, and kosher butchers - all the comforts one would expect from an observant Orthodox Jewish community.

The baby boom of the postwar years happily resulted in many new young parents. As a matter of course, the South Bronx had its own baby equipment store, Sickser's, was located on the corner of Westchester and Fox, and specialized in "everything for the baby" as its slogan read.

The inventory began with cribs, baby carriages, playpens, high chairs, changing tables, and toys. It went way beyond these to everything a baby could want or need. Mr. Sickser, assisted by his son-in-law Lou Kirshner, ran a profitable business out of the needs of the rapidly expanding child population.

The language of the store was primarily Yiddish, but Sickser's was a place where not only Jewish families but also many non-Jewish ones could acquire the necessary items for their newly arrived bundles of joy. Business was particularly busy one spring day, so much so that Mr. Sickser and his son-in-law could not handle the unexpected throng of customers. Desperate for help, Mr. Sickser ran out of the store and stopped the first youth he spotted on the street. "Young man," he panted, "how would you like to make a little extra money? I need some help in the store. You want to work a little?" The tall, lanky African American boy flashed a toothy smile back. "Yes, sir, I'd like some work." "Well then, let's get started."

The boy followed his new employer into the store. Mr. Sickser was immediately impressed with the boy's good manners and demeanor. As the days went by and he came again and again to lend his help, Mr. Sickser and Lou both became increasingly impressed with the youth's diligence, punctuality, and readiness to learn. Eventually Mr. Sickser made him a regular employee at the store. It was gratifying to find an employee with an almost soldier-like willingness to perform even the most menial of tasks, and to perform them well.

From the age of 13 until his sophomore year in college, this young man put in from 12 to 15 hours a week, earning 50 to 75 cents an hour. Mostly, he performed general labor: assembling merchandise, unloading trucks and preparing items for shipments. He seemed, in his quiet way, to appreciate not only the steady employment but also the friendly atmosphere Mr. Sickser's store offered. Mr. Sickser and Lou learned in time about their helper's Jamaican origins and he in turn picked up a good deal of Yiddish.

In time the young man was able to converse fairly well with his employers, and more importantly, with a number of the Jewish customers whose English was not fluent. At the age of 17, the young man, while still working part-time at Sickser's, began his first semester at City College of New York. He fit in just fine with his, for the most part Jewish classmates, hardly surprising, considering that he already knew their ways and their language. However, the heavy studying in the engineering and, later, geology courses he chose proved quite challenging. The young man would later recall that Sickser had offered the one stable point in his life those days.

After signing up for an ROTC program and serving two tours of duty in Vietnam, the young man quickly rose to the top ranks of the US Military. In 1989 under President George Bush, Colin Powell was sworn in as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In 1993, in his position as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, two years after he guided the American victory over Iraq in the Gulf War, General Colin Powell visited the Holy Land. Upon meeting Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in Jerusalem, he greeted the Israeli with the word "Men kent reden Yiddish" (We can speak Yiddish).

As Shamir, stunned, tried to pull himself together, the current Secretary Of State continued chatting in his second-favorite language. Colin Powell never forgot his early days working at Sickser's.