

**This is the story of 311 West 91st Street
in New York, New York, as remembered by
former resident Lynn Burgess.**

311 West 91st Street had a telephone called Skylar 49373. I think Skylar went back to some early history in New York City. I don't know if I was 9 or 10 when we moved into Manhattan. Moving into that house as a 9 or 10-year-old, you're not too aware of anything that's going on, but the real estate person or owner, the surname was Gilbert. I remember that family well because the daughter had been a local dog walker. She was just a few years older than me, in her early teens, and we walked Babe Ruth's dog. He lived, I think, on 89th street, in those upper apartments with the private elevator. At one time we'd just squeeze into the elevator to go upstairs to fetch the dog. Oh, by the way, we each got 25 cents an hour.

[Babe Ruth] was a very uncouth, unfriendly, snarly person. I think he was in the stages of illness, and an alcoholic. His appearance was pretty bizarre. Also, on 89th street, on the Drive, there was a huge mansion and it was owned by a socialite called Bubbles—that's not her Christian name. She was married to a movie person, and he was a delightful young man. In the old black and white movies, he played the kind of 'ah shucks' kind of person. I am

trying to think of his name, Wayne something or other. Oh, his name was Wayne Morris. I think it's now the Parson's School of Design, I'm not quite sure because I wasn't living there at the time. But that's 89th and the Drive.

Of course, on the physical layout of the Drive, the railroad was above surface, and I understand it's underground now. The Hudson River was clean. My brothers used to go swimming, skinny, in the river. We used to use the hillside. There wasn't any fencing for our sleds in the winter time to go down. We went back to visit in 1964 for the World's Fair. I had 3 little boys with me to show them where I had lived, and a police man, it was early evening, told us not to go down the Drive. He was very helpful and kind, but he felt it was a place that people shouldn't be wandering in the evening. It was that time in the 60s, it was '64 when we were there.

Anyway, entering the house on the first floor on the left side there was a bedroom. It was a living room originally and became a bedroom. Then on the right side wall we had a hung telephone. Over to the right side there were stairs, which curved and turned left. Under the left side of the stairs was a dumbwaiter to the second floor from the first floor kitchen.

The layout of the downstairs, in the front there was a living room, and the rest was the hallway with the stairs up, and as you went back there was a kitchen right behind it. To the left of the kitchen, there was a small bathroom, and the bathroom also had an outside entry, I think, where the trash cans or something, into that small bathroom.

Going beyond the kitchen, there was a huge, what we call today a great room. The great room had very high ceilings, I think the first and second did have extremely high ceilings. The great room, one side of the wall had an enormous mirror, covering almost the entire wall on the right-hand side. It was laid into a very thick dark wood frame. It was enormous. To the right of that room was a bedroom. The great room had tall windows to the yard.

The yard was not accessible from the ground floor. We had to go through the basement to get outside. I'm just trying to remember if going up the stairs, there were a lot of crystal lamps and my mother tried to update and modernize. You couldn't give them away, nobody wanted them. I'm not quite sure if there was a window on the right side or not. The yard I said was only accessible by stairs underneath the regular upstairs case. You went down cement stairs and then there was an enormous basement that covered the entire downstairs. The basement had

large storage areas, including the most important part, the furnace and a coal bin near the furnace. During World War II, coal was not accessible, so we were delivered oil. Oil was free flowing.

There was a Presbyterian church. I'm certain it would still be there across the street going to West End Avenue. The Super there used to come over early in the morning to shovel the coal into the furnace. By the way, in order to get outside. You were in a deep basement, with a lot a lot of open storage area, and we had an old fashioned washing machine there. I don't think they had dryers because we used to hang stuff out on the lines. We used to hang them inside because my mom didn't think the laundry should be exposed to the eyes. It was the old spin dryer that they used. This was World War II times. You had concrete steps leading up into the outside yard.

I remember a lot of cement, and a very little dirt area. Funny, there was a big magnolia tree. How a magnolia tree got into New York City, I don't know. Every time my older brother tried to plant something green to grow in there, we had a dog that managed to eat it up. There wasn't any real foliage in the yard. Walking up the stairs, you could open to the left there was a huge section in the front of the one-third there was a wide hallway, and in the front

section that extended over the balcony. There was a regular door entry, and the balcony was for two rooms. It was not one open room.

One bedroom, which was mine, had a pink marble fireplace and a tiny corner sink so you didn't have to go to the bathroom to do your hair or brush your teeth. I am remembering a beautiful screen screening it off from the room.

Regarding the balcony, my boyfriend, later my husband, used to walk, he lived at Central park, over to throw small pebbles in the evening to gain my attention so I could wave. So using your terminology, Juliet balcony, just almost made me cry, how appropriate. It was perfect. That was about one-third. It was an enormous entry hallway. To the right side was another great room, which we used more as a formal living room and in a little area was a dining place. My mother had put in a tiny kitchenette so that the main kitchen was downstairs, it was not very large. Upstairs was kind of a kitchenette, which served as an area near the dining. I can see, I can even tell you the color of the furniture and the huge heavy drapes we had in the winter, which would be taken down and lightweight drapes put on,

There were beautiful windows, but the windows my mother had removed because it was stained glass and she wanted it to be very light. That's another thing, nobody worshiped stained glass in those days. I'm just trying to think of, well the kitchenette as I said was in place. I know my mom always had a coffee pot going for herself and the maid. Well the entry to that huge secondary great room above the downstairs great room was oak doors, floor to ceiling, huge. They were on rails that you used to put them aside.

These doors were enormous, like the front of the house practically. That opened to that area. That was the second floor. Then the third floor had two small apartments, with a large shared bathroom. The bathroom was enormous. It had those tiny white octagon tiles on the floor. And a big bathtub with those claws. It was pretty tall to get in and out. I don't remember when those structures came to that nature.

The next two floors my parents used for rentals, and we had graduate students, some from Columbia, sometimes. I don't remember, once we had some of these pre-war refugees, or something. I lived in that house from the age of 9 or 10 until I was 24, and my boyfriend came back. I was married at 21, he was 24, and my folks set up an apartment for us, that was our wedding gift, rent-free.

We had a tiny refrigerator, and a two burner, but we managed to get a lot of meals from the folks. We were both in college at night. I was at NYU in Greenwich Village, and I had a full day job. My husband had a day job and was going back to college. He had left when the war broke out and of course all the young people got involved, except for the very wealthy people. Very wealthy people lived on Riverside Drive. Riverside Drive, at the time we moved in was very stately and had doormen downstairs. I played with a little girl, and imagine an 11 to 12-year-old being announced upstairs, to go upstairs. I remember polio was prevalent at the time. This little girl was on crutches, and when the chauffeur had to bring her to my house, they had to go up the stoop. He had to carry her into the house so we could play, and I know she couldn't go upstairs because of the crutches, so we stayed downstairs. That was a time when the Hindenburg also passed over, before it burst into flames. That was about 1937-38. It hit Lake Hurst, New Jersey.

My dad was an insurance agent for Prudential, which is an English company, and part of my Saturday morning job was to go add up little things for him just to do tiny little clerical things. Part of my studies were going into art galleries, museums. Money was very tight, and it was still the depression until World War II broke

out. I remember going into different art galleries and museums. My dad loved it. My mom was glad to get us out of the house. When my parents first bought the house, they hired someone to clean the two upstairs floors, and this gal didn't want to work for us because she was afraid to plug in the Hoover. Vacuum cleaners in those days were called Hoovers. She was afraid of electricity. This was the 1930's. The world has turned around a lot of times.

Then Aunt Teresa Duffy came to us, and she became part of our family. She was more than a maid, she was a friendly person. My younger brother and I were close; we were a year apart. The older brother lived in his own world, 3 years older and started college at 14.5. So you know he was pretty weird. Anyway, I went to a school then called Joan of Arc. It was not parochial; it was part of the school system in New York City.

We had Mayor LaGuardia, who was very well known because there was some kind of radio strike, or newspaper strike. He used to read the comics on the radio to children. As part of the graduation process, I was picked to make the Junior High graduation speech to him. I wasn't the student originally selected, she became ill. They walked down the line, looked at faces, and they said "Aha, here's somebody". I wound up with Mayor LaGuardia I was 5'2" at the time, he was my height.

and white, we did not have any color. So, the world has turned around very, very rapidly.

But the main reason I wanted to mention was the Foreign Exchange Bank of New York. As far as there was a major, of course, building on the corner which I imagine still exists. It was huge. We had an opera star who kept, in the summer nights when our windows were open, she kept going up and down the scales and I kept praying for her to burst into song, but it never happened.

Coming from a European background, I was raised on the opera and the classics. Still to this day, the last thing that I remember here is the Beatles in California, and the Beach Boys. They were great. I raised my family in Whittier, and one of the Beach Boys, Brian I think, lived near us. That was our only claim to fame here.

I picture [the house] looking across the street facing the balcony. On the left was an enormous building, with a doorman there and directly across the street the doorman on the other side. Then this little row of houses that our house consisted of. We had a house near us on the left-hand side, which was owned by a unique couple. It was my first introduction, I didn't know why that woman dressed like a guy always in a suit with a short haircut, but

the girlfriend was drop-dead gorgeous. She looked like an Erte painting of the 20's and 30's. Tall, beautiful women with a wolfhound. They lived on the left, and friendly and nice with us.

Immediately to the right of our house was a house owned by my two godparents. We belonged to a Hungarian speaking church on East 68th Street in New York. Their surname was Denagy, some sort of nobility. They lived in the entire five story frame, and he was very famous at the time, because he was a member of the New York Athletic Club. I'm not quite sure what sport he was in. We had an old relative who was into running, racing, but I don't think that was his forte. Now, next to him, that means two more houses down to the right of the 311, was a place that housed a British club. They had meetings here and there. Every parade in New York had these fellows getting ready outside with those big beaver hats, and they marched in all of the New York parades. We used to stay out there with our mouths wide open in awe of their appearance.

The building across the street, on 91st street had this type of shop in the basement. It was beautifully finished. I know we used to go down to the tailor shop in the bottom. You know, if you had to get hems done or get a burst put in. There was a nice shop there. In those days, people coming from small, Slovakian countries were

so talented with sewing that it was easier for my mom, instead of doing the stuff to just go across the street and have it hemmed over there. I don't know, I didn't do too much of this. I was a kid and lost in my own little world, of course we had World War II going.

From Hungary we had three of my mother's relatives, and they joined the American army, and they were young men. They became officers because they were educated people, and they spoke several languages. My parents were born in 1890, and were Austrian and Hungarian. So they spoke German as well as Hungarian, and of course English. My father also spoke French, because in those days French was the international language, not English. Anyway, these relatives came and one of them became quite a hero. Parachuter with General Wild Bill Donovan. He parachuted over Hungary when it was occupied by the enemy, and managed to steal some little Persian rugs, which wound up in his possession.

Then there was Bella Hurcheck, and then my cousin Steven Forboss. They all became American citizens with their service to the United States army. Then I had an uncle who had been a prisoner of war in World War I, at 19 years of age he was captured by the Russians. On his release, from prison as a prisoner of war

from the Hungarian army, my father told him don't come back to Hungary because they were so worried about communism being imported with these young people who were held prisoners. My dad met him at a sea port in Turkey, managed to give him money and he went to France and became a secretary. The fellow was the head of the government, was forced out by the Germans when they marched in and pushed out of a window.

My parents were housing people who were coming here temporarily upon their way. By the way, my uncle established a business. The family had owned art galleries and museums back in Europe, and he was doing publishing. He did a huge dictionary for the book of the month club. It was a miserable thing because it was so big and heavy. Don't forget, we didn't have the computers. He established a firm, and early on he made his big, big, big bucks by children's books that had little tabs on the corner that wiggled as you opened the book. The money wasn't in the classics. He did artwork. His art was published; I have some of his books. Part of his things, the best of the print that they had done, the color plates, were done by the way by the Japanese, they had the sense of color in those days.

We were older at that point in time. It was called Hyperion press. We go way back, and I have tiny little books here that he

published on individual artists. They were a little small. On Van Gogh, Picasso. There was something called Tudor Publishing Company in New York. I guess it says text and note from Queens University in Canada, and those books were also sold, I don't know if the book of the month club or who handled the sales. I have here "rights reserved Tudor Publishing Company", and this particular book was in 1966, it was a much later point in time.

There were two bedrooms on the first floor. I had two brothers, and mine and my parent's shared the area that lead to the front balcony. When I was married, my husband and I had a small third floor studio apartment, is what they call them. There were two of those. The other one was a rental. Then the two upstairs.

Then Teresa's job, she changed the linens and cleaned, and I don't know what else, whatever her duties were. She used to come over. She had no family, and just lived with a cousin. She came from County Cork, at the age of 14. She became really close. Although I'm not Catholic, my mom allowed me to go to church with her on Sunday mornings. I used to love to listen to the priest, because I was taking Latin in high school. Of course then the church wasn't that modern, and all of the rites and ceremonies, and those were very appealing to a young person. She was part of the family. She came early.

We had the most fantastic bakeries. Oh, the bakeries were so fantastic. At home, when people came over you always served something in those days. I remember my mother making those little petifores, they are little cubes and you ice them on all sides, and beautifully decorated them with the almond paste, marzipan.

My mother was not the world's best cook but we didn't know it because they had lived a good life back in Europe before they left in 1920, the communists were prevalent and my father just took off and he had been part of the government there. He had not a top administrative job, but an administrative job, a clerical thing like accounting for agriculture for the country.

My mother, born in 1890, was a hausfrau. We children were all born in the United States and they were married in 1915, and the first born was my oldest brother, George born in 1924. I was born in 1927, and Jerry in 1928. So, my mother kind of gave up baking because on Broadway every single street had the most fantastic bakeries, they were European refugees, pre-war, post-war, or wartime. We had the most fantastic type of European bakeries, Austrian, Swiss, you name it.

Teresa's job, part of her job was when she left home in the morning to come over to the house. She lived on the East side—Broadway was kind of a cut off there—and stop at a place called Hanscomb's bakery, because he made the best darn corn muffins in the world. The bakeries there were enormous and beautiful.

On the very corner before the subway, we had kind of a little veggie place, not a meat market, but veggies. Part of my job coming home from school was to stop off and buy five cents worth of soup greens, because that soup pot was going all the time, just like the coffee pot, I think all day long. On the extreme corner on Broadway and 91st Street was a small cigar store. I remember going into the store to ask for the little cigar boxes that we used to keep our pencils in, and pens, for school. All of a sudden I looked behind the drapery and the whole back room, which was enormous, was a place where they were taking bets. I don't even know what they called that place. This is New York.

Oh, I have something funny about the house that I didn't recall until now. Teresa used the electrical up in the roof area. Someplace I had a picture of her sunning herself up there on the roof. Once a year we had an inspector from New York come to inspect whatever the laws had prevailing at the time, I have no idea what he was looking for. Once he appeared on a hot day with

a big black umbrella. They may have been different people, that was just the man that I saw that day. I thought what does he need an umbrella, it's not raining. My father laughed and after he left he said we put a \$5 bill in the umbrella every time they come and they don't even bother to inspect.

We had an Irish person running for the mayor at the time, and we were talking very lightly with Teresa. I'm sure she was younger than my mother, older than me, maybe 15 years older than I. She was an unmarried single lady, and she said she was going to vote for Bill whatever, he was running for mayor. I said are you a citizen? I know she came here at 14 from County Cork. She said, oh no, but we're going to vote for him anyway. So you put two and two together. I mean, politics were very ripe. I do remember the voting with Landon and James Walker was running for public office, way back when I was a little kid. He was unable to get anybody backing him, because at that time he was a Catholic. So the world has changed a lot since then. Kennedy became a Catholic president.

We had a lot of people from Italy, and that's where we had the most magnificent food in the world. They came to settle a lot on Staten Island, but I worked for American Express at one point near Wall Street, and got into the history of that area. Then there

was another time, but its' crazy because all these things are coming back.

That era, only lasted until World War II, because the doorman disappeared. They got better jobs if they weren't in the service during the war. I think people with less means lived in those types of houses.

The world then seemed a lot more gracious in some ways. However, people don't look at the economics of the time, and things were very rough until the war. The war actually brought a better economic condition for people living there. They had more jobs available. Things were turning at a different pace. My early years as a young person, you were not involved in the economics. You knew you had a place, free food to eat, and luckily a job.

I can't put my finger on my favorite memories at the house. It was just when you are very young you take it for granted and you're living in circumstances, your dad had a good job. Your mom was smiling, welcoming, and warm. The family, maybe that's it, we were a family until George got drafted into the war. Also a welcoming family in the sense that we had people coming, my cousin Emily fled from Germany at age 12. Her mom was involved in politics, and she came in through Canada. She traveled with

somebody with means, a Baroness from Germany. And she came to live with us at age 12. I remember changing rooms so she and I had the small room downstairs. The fact that those 3 cousins from Hungary who came to fight in war, my mom made room for them. It was a good time the folks had extra income when they were able to rent, but when they had family come, it was just kind of a refuge until everybody got on their feet. These weren't people taking advantage. They were all educated people who were able to move on. I think that would be my very best memory, is that it was a very welcoming place.

I'm 89, I've been a widow since 1978. So I've been quite alone. I worked until my mid-70s at schools. I was a school office manager full-time. Then from that time at age 65 I went into another school district from where I was working, and I did workman's comp and teacher's insurance until I was in my mid-70s. Darn it the day is so long here, especially with daylight savings. I volunteered 13 years at the Orange County Performing Arts here in Southern California. But then driving at night kind of stopped me from that type of thing.

I volunteered for a little while way back at the local library, which is a beautiful functioning place there at Huntington Beach. I was working with language and we had a lot of people who didn't

speaking English well. I had a lifetime friend who had a master's degree in accounting, but her accent was horrible so I was volunteering with English. Then I had a young Mexican boy who was a delightful child, tried to help him with getting his English up to par. He was sending money back to support family back there. He was a young 20-year-old. So I've tried to become involved.

That's the hardest thing, this is a personal thing, aging. It's that you're so out of what's going on and trying to be involved. I read two newspapers every day and no TV in the daytime, exercise and yoga classes just to keep moving. By the way, my mind is functioning, but the body is falling down a little bit. I don't have any of the old age diseases except the occasional pain in the right shoulder, but outside of that with the type of eating that we do here in California with all of these farmer's markets, there's no diabetes here. I understand that a large population of this country has diabetes. My blood pressure, they are all putting poison in their face. I like a little meat but I try to keep away from anything outrageous, middle of the road and everything. I think I'm just a vanilla person. So we're not leaning left or right, we're right in the middle with our mouth open in awe at all the things that are going, and counting our blessings for all the things we have. So, getting involved in the world is very important for me, because I have a great feeling of compassion for those who don't.

You know, it's so funny, because my daughter had always wanted to go to New York. Of course, I adopted her when I was 40, so you know there wasn't any time there. It was so funny. I wouldn't want to go back to New York, because my memories are so sweet and somebody lent me a book, one of these table books, of New York with all the new architecture and I'm thinking it looks so crowded, I don't think I could breathe anymore. I worked in so many nice places. I worked across the street from Rockefeller Center, when I worked at American Express during World War II. They did have great cookies across the street in Rockefeller Center. It's true. The spirit of New York and the spirit of the East coast are very different from here in California.

When I went to visit relatives in Boston I was amazed at how people are so happy and involved in local politics, whether it was pro or con. Their personal involvement and their enthusiasm. There was a whole different vibrancy from the East coast to here in California. Sometimes you get the dregs of society there, we get them here. When I meet somebody from the East coast, it's like their brother, sister, and friend. It's just great. So, you're in a wonderful place. I know things are happening there all the time, and that's a good thing.

[California is also] really nice and Huntington Beach here is most pleasant. The weather is outstanding. I have flowers all day, I can look out of my window and I have hummingbirds and a big tree here year around. I can look outside and I don't want to go to any of these old age places. I want to stay in my house. I have a beautiful yard, and I have about 45 pots of flowers out there. Right now everything is blooming, so when you look out, that color is just food for the soul. Thank you again for letting me go back into my happy memories.

