

*An article in The New York Times that provided insights into my parents' lives that I only realized during the writing process.
Photo © The Beresford by David Shankbone*



Splendor, at Last

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By Peter Osnos¹

In September 1929, a few weeks before the stock market crash, a three-towered apartment building in late Italian Renaissance style opened on the corner of Central Park West and 81st Street. It was named the Beresford, after the hotel it replaced, and was a masterwork of the architect Emery Roth, a Jewish emigrant from the Austro-Hungarian Empire whose background limited his chances for commissions to build on the posh east side of the park.

“And what a creation!” exclaims Andres Alpern in his book “Luxury Apartment Houses of Manhattan: An Illustrated History” (1992, Dover Publications). Two hundred feet square and 22 stories high, the building had three elegant entrances and only one or two apartments—simplexes and duplexes—to a floor. It looked like a European fortress, Mr. Alpern wrote, and was every bit as lavish as the era that was about to end. Today, in another gilded age for Central Park West, the Beresford is once again a New York symbol of grandeur.

For nearly half of its 75 years, the Beresford was home to my parents, Joseph and Marta, and I came to understand over time that it was more than a residence to them. Although their apartment was relatively modest by Beresford standards, the splendor made them

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feel prosperous. Living there provided a sense of connection to the comfortable, secure life they were forced to leave behind, when they fled the Nazi onslaught of Europe.

The named Central Park West apartment buildings of the early 20th century, like the Majestic, the San Remo and the Eldorado, were different from the numbered residences along Fifth and Park Avenues in that they were not “restricted,” which meant that many of the residents were Jews. In the 1930’s and 40’s, these people were what was loosely known as “All Rightniks,” second- or third-generation Jewish merchants and professionals who were associated with solid West Side temples like Rodeph Sholom and B’nai Jeshurun. There were a cut below the wealthy “Our Crowd” set of German Jews at Temple Emanu-El, but they still sent their children to private schools and expensive summer camps.

As the situation worsened in Europe in the late 1930’s, a flow of wealthier Jews got out, and they too found their way to Central Park West. My parents were not part of that lucky group. They grew up on Warsaw and spent much of the 30’s in Paris. But they were back in Poland when the war started in 1939, and only by acts of great daring and good luck did they manage to escape. They made their way across Romania, Turkey and Iraq, and found refuge in Bombay, where they lived until securing visas to the United States.

A troop ship transported them across the Pacific, and in the spring of 1944, they arrived by train in New York. My parents were in their late 30’s, my brother, Robert, was almost 13. I was still in a basket, barely 6 months old, with an Indian birth certificate that declared “Caste: Polish.”

Joseph and Marta found an apartment in the Belnord on 86th Street and Broadway, another fabulous neo-Classical stone pile that had started to get a little shabby. The rent was about \$125 a month for seven rooms, split among three families, and some of the furniture came from the Salvation Army. But it was a great place to be a child. There was a large courtyard where bike riding and ball playing were permitted. Over time, the other people in our apartment moved out, and my parents, with what in retrospect seems like amazing equanimity, re-established careers and even bought a summer home on a lake in New Jersey. It is hard to believe that they were barely a decade from their harrowing escape.

The Beresford also had its ups and downs. According to “Luxury Apartment Houses of Manhattan,” the building had a hard time dealing with the effects of the Great Depression. In 1940, it was sold in tandem with the San Remo Apartments for a total of \$25,000 over the mortgages for the two buildings. Much of the West Side was also in decline and many “All Rightniks” made the move to the suburbs and the East Side. Nonetheless, Central Park West still had those fabulous buildings of the 20’s, and in 1962, the Beresford became a co-op.

My parents bought their first apartments for \$18,000. A few years later they upgraded to the more expensive 8B—the cost was \$40,000, if I recall—with a better view, one that looked south across the Museum of Natural History over the park to Central Park South.

By then I was in college, so the Beresford didn't have the gauzy glow for me that the Belnord did. But for my parents, I now realize, it had enormous significance. With its ornate trimmings and moldings, the door and elevator men, the view of the park, the Beresford represented the lifestyle they had expected for themselves before the war. It had taken them 20 years to do it, but when Joseph and Marta moved into the Beresford, they had completed their journey back to where they felt they belonged. I don't remember them ever speaking about this, yet I know how important it was for them to reclaim the graciousness in their lives to match the courage and energy they had expended in rescuing themselves and their sons.

My favorite Beresford moment came in the mid-1960's when I was preparing to move to New York for graduate school at Columbia. My mother was eager for me to live at home. But after years of living in dorms and student housing, I was skeptical. "Mother," I said with a clear sense of priorities, "what if I want to entertain a girl?"

The next day, a Saturday, it was raining heavily, and a young woman friend came for a visit. My mother disappeared and returned soaking wet moments after the girl had left. "Where have you been?" I demanded. She replied, "I didn't want you to think I was interfering with your privacy."

Eventually, I chose to live with two other guys on West 99th Street, where my share was about \$100 a month. But for another three decades, I was a regular visitor to the Beresford. We celebrated my mother's 80th birthday and my father's 90th in the spacious living room, dining room and entry hall. Both of them slept their last nights there before they died. In so many ways, the Beresford and Apartment 8B was the finish line for them, the terminus of their remarkable life journeys.

Today, the Beresford is home to moguls and superstars. As an address, it is more splendid than ever, beautifully maintained and worth every penny, I suspect, of the millions it costs to buy into it. Every time I pass the place, I pay my respects to the enduring beauty of the building and the tradition of urban good living it represents. Mostly, however, I honor it on behalf of my parents, whose strength and style it served so well.

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