Broken dreams, broken promises

Eight decades ago, half the population of the Bronx was Jewish, and the ‘Champs-Elysees’ of their world was the four-and-a-half-mile long Grand Concourse. Today, most of the Jews, and most of the glamour, are gone, but there are some signs of revival. A new book tells the story.

Boulevard of Dreams
Heady Times, Heartbreak, and Hope along the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, by Constance Rosenblum
New York University Press, 267 pages, $27.95

By Mark Jay Mirsky

Writers who are passionate exiles from their childhoods in New York City’s Bronx, and its Jewish soul, the Grand Concourse, may well wonder at the credentials of this reviewer. Several of my Bronx friends – Cynthia Ozick, Jerome Charyn, Leonard Kriegel, Marshall Berman – are quoted in “Boulevard of Dreams,” Constance Rosenblum’s celebration and lamentation for the Grand Concourse, its history, golden moments in literature and architecture, its unmistakable Jewish “tam” (flavor), and the end of that world – but I never lived in the borough.

While my childhood was spent on a street, Blue Hill Avenue, that was a synonym for Boston’s largest Jewish district from the 1920s through the ’60s, I have rented on Manhattan’s Lower East Side since 1963. I witnessed my neighborhood go from solid Jewish, Italian and Ukrainian families, and artists and poets, to welfare clients and drug dealers, and today back to young professionals and college students. I missed the Bronx in its heyday, though I recall a trip in 1957 to a stretch of gloomy high-rises, through endless corridors, up shabby elevators, to a friend’s shadowy apartment. That and the bleak drive along the Cross Bronx Expressway, and the echoes from the lives of my own students from the Bronx was the sum of my knowledge.

Until this fall, I had never wandered the Grand Concourse, but I am grateful as others who never set foot there will be for “Boulevard of Dreams.” Bronx natives scattered to the four corners of the earth should be jubilant. Constance Rosenblum has given them a comprehensive Yizkor volume, not unlike those compiled by survivors of towns whose Jews were murdered by the Germans in the Holocaust, a guide and memorial to an extinguished world along the Grand Concourse. The Bronx, however, is hardly dead, and in fact remains a crucial geography for New York City’s future.

There were many subdivisions of social worlds in the Bronx through the last century. In choosing to concentrate on its central cultural artery, Rosenblum, a journalist at The New York Times, spends much more time with the Jewish life that clung to the Concourse than she does with the Italian and Irish worlds, or even the African-American and Hispanic ones that eventually displaced the earlier ethnic neighborhoods.

“Jews were the ones who made the Grand Concourse and its environs their own,” she declares, and the evidence is indisputable. “A four-and-a-half-mile wide 182-foot-wide thoroughfare completed in 1909 and built originally to accommodate fast horses and horse-drawn carriages,” the Concourse, suggests the author, was “strongly reminiscent of the famed Champs-Elysees in Paris,” as its inhabitants were wont to boast, their imaginations fired by their dreams of treading the boulevards of Paris in their Bronx Zion.

The Bronx’s soul

The strength of “Boulevard of Dreams” is its author’s journalistic scope. Rosenblum provides a detailed history of the Grand Concourse’s origins in the woods and pastoral fields of mid-19th-century New York, before the Bronx was absorbed into the city, and its rocky outcroppings and farms belonged to Westchester County. She gives a full-length portrait of the man who planned the Concourse, Louis Risse, a French architect. This “visionary engineer” fell in love with the Bronx on a hunting trip during his first visit to America, and lived out his life in the borough. Risse laid out the boulevard along a series of rocky ridges to the east of Jerome Avenue, on lands, newly annexed...
Shlepping the Concourse

I came up onto the Grand Concourse through a gauntlet of honky-tonk souvenir shops, with a sprinkling of bars and restaurants, from the D train at 161st street, its station dedicated to the new Yankee Stadium built with city subsidies and usurped parkland – a debatable benefit to the borough. I was struck as I passed the refurbished, handsome Bronx Courthouse, by the empty shops on the corners directly opposite.

This was once the cultural hub of the Bronx. On the northeast corner, one of the Concourse’s most striking art deco buildings is today plastered with “For rent” signs. The former Concourse Plaza Hotel, on the southeast corner, is now a home for the elderly. Men and women in wheelchairs stared out of a gloomy courtyard through massive iron bars on a cold, cloudy Sunday, as I started a walk of several hours up toward Edgar Allan Poe’s house on Kingsbridge Road. Despite all the information I had gleaned from “Boulevard of Dreams” about art deco and the innovative architecture along the Concourse, what struck me most were the shabby entries, the wall of yellow brick often stretching a whole block without a break, except for dark alleys strewn with trash. The contrast was startling when a landlord, or tenants, had taken the time to plant flowers, or maintain the trees.

When I returned on subsequent days, though, I began to see a different Concourse. A court officer opposite the boarded-up synagogue on Walton Avenue a block down from the Concourse told me that middle-class families were moving in, buying condominiums, and that there were once again buildings with doormen.

In front of the Fish Building, with its striking exterior (it got its nickname from a mosaic of an aquarium flanking its entrance), a young woman who spoke of the Concourse as “the new frontier” urged us to go through the bleary front door of the apartment house and photograph the lobby. Further along we encountered Executive Towers, the last substantial modern apartment complex put up along the Concourse. Although it fell into bankruptcy at one point, it has recovered to become one of the most desirable addresses on the boulevard.

There are other moments of hope, but at a complex that was for a long time, according to Rosenblum, the Concourse’s best, the Lewis Morris, a large security cage sat in the grand marble lobby. A knot of young men arguing loudly lounged in front of it when I first passed late in the afternoon. One Bronx historian reported that, months earlier, he had come home from a visit to the building to discover on TV that someone had been killed in the lobby just moments before he had sped away on his bicycle – to shouts of “What are you looking at!” He had paused to admire the elegant facade. In the morning the entry was not threatening, but the bottom row of shop windows looked distressed. The Morris, for decades the address for doctors and dentists, like many grand buildings along the Concourse now houses welfare clients.

Still, the cool breeze along this high ridge tickled me, most people smiled broadly as we stopped in the morning, to take pictures, talk, hoping it seemed as well for a return to the old dreams of the Concourse.

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Continued on page 17
specializations as a hindrance to the kind of broad vision he holds essential for educated and enlightened scholars.

Most of the remaining chapters deal with the Jewish religious mitzvot and their place in the system of belief and knowledge. Unlike other medieval books on the commandments, such as those of Rabbis Saadit Ashkenazi, Maimonides and Nachmanides, here there is no discussion of halakha – religious law – and its minhag; rather, the discussion is entirely on a theoretical level. Chapter two deals with the numbering of the commandments, whereas the scholar presents and criticizes the systems of several earlier “commandment-counters.”

Later, Ibn Ezra sorts the mitzvot according to several key themes: condition and absolute commandments, principal and not-principal, those explained within the Torah text and those that are not, and so on. According to Simon, “those mitzvot not explained within the Torah itself pose the main problem,” because they demand complex methods of research and understanding, which may be misleading. Thus, when attempting to address these, Ibn Ezra uses the language of the Psalms, saying “Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law” (Psalm 119:18).

Astrological explanations

Ibn Ezra’s belief in astrology comes to the fore in subsequent chapters. Astrological explanations are offered, for example, for the profound differences between the festivals of the month of Nisan and the festival of Passover. As noted by Simon in his comments, “those mitzvot are the hardest to be taken too seriously; Ibn Ezra belonged to the latter. In the second chapter of “Foundation of Torah” (chapter 11), and in the final paragraph of the book is meant to be inspirational; it consists of multiple biblical formulas and geometric drawings accompanying the edited text.”

The book’s final chapters flow on past the direct issues of mitzvot, and deal with a life of holiness (chapter 10), interpretation of God’s name and the letters that constitute it (chapter 11), and man’s service to God (chapter 12). Chapter 11 is also divided into several sub-chapters related to God’s name and the letters that constitute it. Ibn Ezra’s thoughts are of great weight to the study of the Hebrew alphabet letters. He believed that the fortune of the Jewish people was connected with the letter heh – dualism, and vav – connection. Other groups of letters are treated in the book, according to different characteristics: Some letters are divided according to their locations in the mouth (lips, teeth, tongue, etc.); some are “root-like” or “servants,” and the like. Toward the end, the discussion of letters becomes almost purely mystical, and may have been elicited from Ibn Ezra had he been foreseen current trends in the world of Torah and yeshiva study.

As noted by Simon in his comments, the final paragraph of the book is meant to be inspirational; it consists of multiple biblical verses with the connecting words between them. Ibn Ezra, wishing to express the close connection between Israel and its land, and to compare present-day Israel as a part of God or His heritage. At this point, the close of the chapter and of the book, according to Simon, do not make sense. “This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter into it” (Psalm 118:20), inviting the reader to imagine the back gate; like Abraham Ibn Ezra, paradoXical and intentional.