

[Washington Market Blues]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK [??] Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park North

DATE December 12, 1938

SUBJECT WASHINGTON MARKET BLUES (DANNY COHEN)

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview 15 Amsterdam Avenue
3. Name and address of informant Danny Cohen (Keep Anonymous) 1259 Clay Avenue
Bronx, N. Y.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

None
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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None

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

This is an artist's studio; small, adequately lighted by northern lighting, on second floor of old college dispensary building. Several canvases about the walls one on the easel near the window, tubes of paint and rags on the workbench. Lower half of window coated with dust through which someone's fingers, presumably the artist's has tracked tentative outlines of a torso and a face or two. General impression of fitful work going on. Informant seems to have left stamp of his personality on his paintings.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER HERMAN SPECTOR

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park North, Bronx.

DATE

SUBJECT (WASHINGTON MARKET BLUES) (DANNY COHEN)

1. Ancestry Russian (?) Jewish
2. Place and date of birth About 1913, New York City
3. Family Has father, now separated from family, mother, at least one brother living.

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4. Places lived in, with dates East Side chiefly. Also the Bronx.

5. Education, with dates ? Public School

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Was peddler, stock-clerk, packer in butter house (wholesale), actor, artist.

7. Special skills and interests

Excellent mind, has performed professionally. Likes to attend prizefights and smoke little cigars.

8. Community and religious activities

None that I know of.

9. Description of informant

Medium height, slim, dark, small features, impish in appearances. Heavy eyebrows and comical twist of lips. Eyes redrimmed.

10. Other Points gained in interview

Retains some of the actor's characteristics; rather touchy at times but essentially good-humored, likes to clown, anxious to make good impressions.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park North, Bronx.

DATE

SUBJECT (WASHINGTON MARKET BLUES) (DANNY COHEN)

The old man is a type type like this: nice chubby face, always smiling, trying to get on the good side of everybody, he talks about cleaning up millions while he's trading on a shoestring; but when he gets home he beats up his wife and steals nickels from the kids. He takes me into the Produce Exchange - I'm a kid then, peddling ice-cream around the market - and he nudges me: order a sandwich, he says, low, then he hollers out: Sammy, order anything you like! Vaiter! . . . So I ask for a cheese sandwich, and he turns around to everybody smiling, see, de best in de house for mine Sammy! But I'm not so dumb: once he tries that stunt too often, so I order a regular dinner with desert and all the trimmings. Boy, there was murder in his eyes! But he carries it off, keeps smiling around, takes out a few nickels from one pocket and puts it in another, chews on the cigar he sniped like it was straight Havana, but when we get outside do I got it! - clop, right on the head! The old man packed a terrific wallop.

Every day it was something different with the old man, every day he had a "nyah plahn" (new plan) as my mother would say. He used to work on the basis of picking up "bargains" in the market - any kind of junk, he didn't care how lousy the stuff was, so long as he could make a penny or two profit. By trade he was a housepainter and handyman, but he always complained he was too sick to work at it. For a sick man he had a healthy appetite. At supper he would eat 2 like a horse, then in the middle of the night we could hear him groaning: "Oy de craitz tit meer vay!" (the back hurts me,) and he'd stop the rest of us from sleeping. Already when I was seven years old I was helping out the old

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man. Money that I made peddling ice-cream or baigles he used to take away from me, so don't worry, I got most of it back from his pickets at night, and I gave it to my mother: I knew she needed it. She was the one who really supported the family: we were janitors for fifteen years, so who do you think did the work? The old man once started in to paint an apartment and right in the middle he quit; my mother and me had to finish it up the landlord shouldn't notice. That's the kind of a guy he was.

I grew up around the Washington Market; I went around everywhere, I got to know all the types. Everything was violent: the noises, the work, the horseplay . . . trucks and wagons came rolling in and out, and the loading and unloading was done by gangs of burly Negroes. The real market opens around eleven at night and goes on into the morning: it's a real night life. The dealers, you know, are fellows who put in 16, 17, hours a day; they have no time to go home to their wives, many of them don't even eat supper home. So when it isn't busy the smoke and kibitz in the coffeepots, play the slot-machines or fool around on the loading platforms. On Friday and Saturday the whores came around; at the same time the razor salesmen, you know those seedy-looking guys, would pass by and sell rubber goods and picture postcards on the side.

If it was fresh baigles I was peddling that day, I would shout "Frisha Baigles!" over one end of the market to the other, and I made out pretty good. I always made out better than the old man - they didn't like him - and I guess that made him sore, but he never admitted it. When the dealers were feeling good, they bought a stack of baigles from me and distributed it to the help. I remember one boss, so fat he could hardly walk, he was always sitting out on the platform with sleepy eyes while the laborers staggered past him with heavy crates and barrels. The way these Negroes worked, when they were slinging these things, 3 there would be maybe six or seven in line, and as the stuff passed from hand to hand they would count out the numbers in rhythm, grunting. The heavy potato barrels were carried on their backs; it was straining work. All the time this fat guy would sit there and tell them what to do. When they were resting, he would sometimes get them to wrestle together. "Pin 'im down!" he used to yell, sitting with legs crossed like a sultan.

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Many a time I had to do a jig or sing a song for him before he would buy anything from me. Sometimes he made me wait for my money maybe three or four days. That was one type.

The Negroes had this big booming laugh: one of them would say something, it didn't have to be funny, then they would start off like Chinese firecrackers. Someone would say, "Gee, dat wuz a bitch of a day!" [,?] meaning it was tough, and they would all laugh like hell as if it was a great joke. That's when they were hanging around for lunch-hour. There was one Negro they called Ham. The dealers were always fooling with him, but it wasn't funny. Once they made him eat twelve bricks of ice-cream. Then other times they would call him you black bastard, or play some other tricks with him. When you saw his face on the side afterwards you could see it wasn't so funny. Everybody around the market cursed something terrific. One of the whores especially. She was about forty years old I think, not loud-looking, with her it was just a business like butter-and-eggs. She would just go in the back, lean against one of the crates, and get it over with. She would always ask Ham to tell her jokes; he knew a lot of them. One of his jokes was to take a stick and tap with it, making believe he was a blind man, then he'd explain that he was a blind man passing through the fish market and turn his head from side to side, smiling, with his eyes closed, and say: "Hello, girls; nice day, girls."

When I was a little older I got a job in one of the butter-and-egg houses; I worked on the butter, and I could tell you plenty about how they pack some of that stuff. Of course it must be different now, but in those days the workers had no union: conditions were terrible. They used girls for packing; they would have no time to wash their hands, you know, or they would get lipstick on their fingers - everything 4 got in the butter. It was all worked on the basis of a belt system, you know; any smudge or fingerprint was just pushed into the butter by the machines, so it was still there, but not on the outside. The girls were different types; you know, the cutie type, the type with a face like a horse who's talking about the fellers all the time, and the type who's just doing the others a favor by living in the same

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world with them. Then the boss also divided the workers against each other, the Italians and the Jews he would talk to separately, he worked on that basis.

Once I worked for a deaf-and-dumb guy, he was the boss' brother, and if I didn't understand the signs or the grunts and groans he made I'd be out of luck. He would shake his head and say: Gnarrhh, nngg! and he'd get real mad if I couldn't make it out. He was strong as an ox, and he always used his mitts. Once he threw me into the icebox and kept me there for fifteen minutes. But I needed the job, what could I do? I was really too small and light for that job, they needed a real husky, so finally the boss fired me. He came over to me as if he was apologizing, told me what a bright young man I was, how much he like me and everything, but - he was full of buts, and as he handed me my pay he got into another longwinded speech but I just slipped the money in my pocket with a loud BUT! [,?] and walked out. I was ready just then to quit that job anyhow.