4730 N. Virginia Avenue

Slanting diagonally into Lawrence Avenue just east of the Chicago River, North Virginia Avenue is as uprepossessing a street as one could find on the North Side of Chicago. Two- and three-flat apartment houses, passably well-maintained but drab, rise one after another on this and the surrounding streets. Most of them are products of the 1920s, when Chicago began expanding to the north, their brick darkened to a dull reddish-brown by time, weather and pollution. A few other larger buildings, four- and five-story walkups with scores of modest apartments for those with modest incomes, break up the symmetry a little. For some observers, the picture offers a kind of tedium-infected fascination, as though all these structures, duplicated in the thousands all over Chicago, were simply meant to shelter anonymous and untold numbers, people whose only evident purpose was to conduct the city's less remunerative business. The buildings, plain as they are, outlast most of those who have lived in them, and do service for a succeeding generation in much the same way.

Such distinction as the 4700 block of North Virginia might have has been determined by accident. The Chicago River, flowing behind it, prevented the city from running it into Lawrence at a 45 degree angle, which is how the neighboring streets are arranged, eight blocks to a mile, in the urban grid employed by planners over a century ago. But the brick three-flat at 4730, otherwise nondescript, is distinguished by a salient fact—back in 1938, for an unknown period of time lasting from several months to under a year, one of the great literary careers of the century had its start here. Saul Bellow began his apprenticeship as a novelist in this building, where he lived with his first wife, Anita, his widowed mother-in-law, and J.J., Anita's brother. His first sheets of hand-written fiction were produced here, after he abandoned graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin.

The apartment is on the western edge of Ravenswood, on the border of depressed Albany Park, and the milieu today is much the same as it was in the Depression—quite remote from anything that might be called cosmopolitan living. A new, somewhat younger middle class began to replace the lower-income one in the 1990s, especially a mile to the east in Lincoln Square. But in the first decades of the twentieth century the streets between the river and Western Avenue became home to German and Russian-Jewish immigrants, and you can still find traces of their presence. The Dank House at Lawrence and Western is a kind of German cultural center, and the Brauhaus, a German restaurant, and Merz, an old, European-style apothecary, are both on Lincoln Avenue. Merz was in the neighborhood when Bellow was part of it; Dank House and Brauhaus were post-war additions. It sounds a bit colorful, but in the Depression the area would have simply been dreary. The old Hild Regional Library in Lincoln Square, since replaced by a music school, would have helped a little. The original glass and marble entry way remains intact, along with a pair of brass Owls of Minerva and polished stone steps.

To the south, the 4700 block of Virginia runs into the Brown Line of the Chicago Elevated, offering residents an escape to wealthier neighborhoods near downtown; Bellow might easily have hopped a street car on Lawrence or walked west from his apartment to the Rockwell El stop on Sacramento Street. The Chicago River, which sounds scenic, would have at the time been only a shallow, polluted, slow-moving waterway, and Lawrence Avenue would have offered the usual collection of funeral homes, bakeries, kosher butchers, pool rooms, pawn shops, pharmacies, and perhaps a movie theater, stores catering to a low-income clientele. The air would also have been less than healthful; residents of the city whom I knew in the 1980s claim it was greatly improved by the Clean Air Act, a piece of legislation from the Nixon years.

In any case, not for nothing does Bellow famously call Chicago "that somber city" on the opening page of *The Adventures of Augie March*.

"I was," he writes, describing that experience in 1938, "a very young, married man who had quickly lost his first job and who lived with his in-laws." This is reported in a 1975 essay called "Starting Out in Chicago." "I sat at a bridge table in a back bedroom of the apartment while all rational, serious, dutiful people were at their jobs or trying to find jobs, writing something." Bellow undertook these labors, like most writers, in the morning, and later shared lunch with his mother-in-law, Sophie Gottschalk, who kept the apartment in far better order than her son-in-law preferred. "West Point arrangements" is the way Bellow terms it. Sophie took trouble preparing her meals, but afterwards Bellow confronted filling the rest of the day. This was a burden, and frequently difficult. His wife was attending classes at the University of Chicago at the other end of the city, and J.J., born in "the Old Country" but raised in Indiana, was practicing law from an office in the Loop. Bellow describes him as a conservative with a taste for "old, really old, La Salle Street Republican sex jokes about Woodrow Wilson and Edith Bolling." The jokes would indeed have been old--Wilson wedded Bolling in 1915, when he was in the White House, and by 1938 had been dead for nearly twenty years. J.J., or Jascha, offered the only evidence of prosperity in the family and owned a Hudson.

"I walked about with something like a large stone in my belly," Bellow writes of those afternoons. "I often turned into Lawrence Avenue and stood on the bridge looking into the drainage canal"—actually the North Branch of the Chicago River. "If I had been a dog I would have howled." Sometimes he made his way in the opposite direction, to the east, to what is now Lincoln Square and the old public library. There he read (or reread) Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay, "people who had resisted the material weight of

American society." In the first of two Jefferson lectures prepared shortly after he wrote "Starting Out in Chicago," Bellow comments on the effect, the inspiration really, of reading the significant writers of the twenties:

> By writing novels and stories, Dreiser and Anderson had added our American life, massive and hardly conscious of itself, to the world and its history. People who in the past would have remained inert and silent, sons and daughters of farmers, laborers, servants, and small tradesmen, had become capable of observation and comment.

Still, "Starting out in Chicago" and the first of the two Jefferson lectures emphasize Bellow's difficulty in learning and practicing his craft. A conventional office job was intolerable; James Atlas reports in his biography that Bellow was fired from the last one he had before moving in with his in-laws on North Virginia Avenue—fired by his brother for failing to keep regular hours in the family-owned coalyard. The Hyde Park rooming houses that he lived in after leaving Ravenswood had long-since vanished by the time he wrote his Jefferson lectures, but not the memory of working there alone while pursuing goals he could not be sure were attainable. He quotes Baudelaire's remark: Happy are those can say at the end of the day, "*Aujourd'hui, nous avons travaille*." "You longed boundlessly, frantically, for contact, interest, warmth, order, continuity, meaning, real reality," writes Bellow. "Community, kinship, roots? It was the essence of your situation that you had no such connections." Hyde Park may have presented a more ample world than the one he had known on the bank of the Chicago River, but it also held memories of his student years at the University of Chicago. "Life in these houses was entertaining," he notes, "but when you had your degree and your friends had gone to take up their professions in New York, in California, in North Africa, it became hard to explain why you were still here."

Long planning my investigation, I finally discovered the Virginia Avenue residence last summer, after conducting a little research at the Chicago Public Library. As those who have read other additions to my Web site know, I was a student of Bellow's for a number of years in the 1980s, when I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago. I learned in the Atlas biography that Bellow moved to Ravenswood after he married Anita on December 30, 1937; because they lived there with his mother-in-law, I thought it might be possible to track the residence down. It had (and has) a special meaning for me. So when the spring semester of 2009 ended at the school where I teach, I went with a friend to the Harold Washington Library Center south of the Loop. From a city directory on microfilm, I learned of his exact address, though this was not a simple task. The microfilmed image is no more than a photograph of a page from an old telephone book, and a crease in the page obscured the address. After scrutinizing the image at some length and checking other telephone books, we ascertained the exact address of our target on Virginia Avenue.

I went there a number of times, and on one of my visits met an elderly woman who lives there now and who described the history of the property. She owns it, has been there for over twenty years. A pair of three-flats—4730 and 4734—were built by the Fahl (or Faul) family in 1926; the children lived there and the present owner bought the 4730 building from them in the 1980s. Bellow's in-laws would have been tenants of the Fahls, who probably belonged, judging from their name, to that original German population that I mentioned. Sophie Gottschalk, the mother-in-law, later moved across the street, to one of the larger buildings holding scores of apartments; that might have represented an economy move after Bellow and her daughter moved out of the apartment in the fall of '38 and down to Hyde Park. There is a large and lovely birch in the small front yard, which the current owner planted when she acquired the property, along

with a tilted lamp pole, long defunct, its four panes missing from the top; it might have been a gas lamp in the thirties. Inside the vestibule I discovered speaker tubes that once connected the entrance with the apartments. The feel of the neighborhood must have been somewhat different in Bellow's day, because the city planted Norwegian maples along the street that cannot be more than thirty or forty years old. Whether the streets were bare or enlivened by a different collection of trees earlier is impossible to know.

There are other residences associated with Bellow scattered around Chicago, of course. In the Atlas biography, I learned that Bellow's father, Abraham, was living at 6135 N. Rockwell Ave. when he died in 1955. He must have moved there from the family home in Humboldt Park either in the Depression or after the war, drawn perhaps by familiarity of the neighborhood: that part of the Northwest Side used to be heavily Jewish, and there are numerous synagogues still there. The various owners of the bungalow have allowed it to fall into decay, and today it has a run-down look. One day I may knock on their door with a copy of *Herzog*, where the house is exactly described in a three-page cameo. If it did not make me feel so intrusive, I would walk up the inset stoop on the right-hand side of the house to see if the original doorbell with the image of a lighted half-moon is still there. The melody it plays, according to the novel, is "Merrily We Roll Along".

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