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ROSA

Rosa—I suppose he was a product of his environment, as we all are—and of heredity. I saw him as a man who had come off the streets of New York and taken some pretty hard knocks and learned to survive.

—Ed Cantrell in *Roughnecking It* by Chilton Williamson Jr., 1982

When it was built in 1905, the Beaux Arts-style, five-story walk-up apartment building at 626 West 136th Street must have seemed a luxurious upgrade for the waves of young home-hungry professionals and upwardly mobile immigrants in New York City at the time.

The new Interborough Rapid Transit Company subway line from downtown to 145th Street at Broadway had opened just the year before, making commutes to the New York business center much easier. The West Harlem neighborhood then known as "Manhattanville" was alive with wharf

and ferry activity on the Hudson River, just a block west. The apartment building, with its mock Ionic columns, cartouches and symmetrical patterns of red and white bricks topped with a flat roof and ornate cornices, was designed by legendary New York architect Emery Roth. Roth's monumental Beaux Arts and Art Deco buildings – The Eldorado, The Beresford, The Ardsley and the San Remo—remain iconic features of New York's Central Park West.

The five-story tenement Roth designed at 626 136th Street was more modest. "Attractive New Apartments" the real estate broker Reeve A. Silk & Co. announced in a one-column September 9, 1906 advertisement in the *New York Times*. Silk & Co described the 13 apartments at 626 136th as "4, 5, 6 rooms with bath. Very large rooms, telephone, electric lights and hall service" and leased them for $32-$45 a month.

According to the 1910 Census, the early tenants at the address were mostly American born of English stock but included Danes, Slovaks, French, Armenians and one large Cuban family. Occupations included lawyer, dentist, milliner, electrician, tailor, theatrical promoter, stenographer, bookkeeper, journalist, and "ancient language" professor. One family had a French servant.

By the 1940 Census, the building had more working-class tenants, including a longshoreman, shoemaker, peddler, telephone operator, waitress, "hot chef" and chocolate maker. There were no servants, but one "lodger." The tenants included immigrants from Ireland, Finland, France, Russia, Cuba, Greece and Germany.

By the time Michael Rosa's family moved there in the early 1950s, the building and the surrounding neighborhood were rapidly becoming majority Puerto Rican after the

massive post-WWII migration to New York from the U.S. island territory. Priests from the nearby Church of the Annunciation and Our Lady of Lourdes were sent to Puerto Rico for crash courses in Spanish so they could speak to their flocks.

Miguel (Michael) Angel Rosa was born November 6, 1948 in Ponce, Puerto Rico as the oldest of five children—two boys and three girls—of Francisco Humberto Rosa and Hipolita Pacheco Rosa. Michael first came to the United States on his mother's lap aboard Pan American World Airways flight 526 on March 1, 1951.

Rosa's "Statement of Personal History" that he completed in 1966 as part of his Marine Corps enlistment process, said that his oldest and closest friends from the West Harlem neighborhood were all Puerto Rican. His friend Julia Santiago lived across the hall from his Fifth-floor apartment #14. His best friend Frank Ruiz lived three floors down in Apartment #7.

The rapid influx of Puerto Ricans added to the tensions that already existed among Irish, African American and Jewish populations. Gangs—The Dragons (mostly Puerto Rican), Egyptian Kings (mostly African American) and Jesters (mostly Irish)—battled over territory. The West Harlem neighborhood where the Rosas lived was an urban combat zone.

It was the era and the neighborhood depicted in the stage musical and movie *West Side Story* with music by Leonard Bernstein and choreography by Jerome Robbins. Originally, in the late 1940s, Robbins had conceived it as a Romeo and Juliet *East Side Story* about a Jewish girl and Catholic boy and the conflicts between the Jewish *Emeralds* and the Catholic *Jets.*

But by the early 1950s, turf wars between white, black

and Puerto Rican youth gangs had captured the public's attention and the revamped musical, now geographically transformed and dubbed *West Side Story,* centered on Puerto Rican *Sharks* and the white *Jets.* To inspire his dancers, Robbins posted newspaper accounts of gang rumbles on a bulletin board in the rehearsal room.

In the summer of 1957, one brutal gang killing in particular dominated the newspaper headlines. Two white boys, Michael Farmer and Roger McShane were walking at night in Highbridge Park in Washington Heights when they were set upon by a combination of *Dragons* and *Egyptian Kings,* Puerto Ricans and African Americans temporarily united for the occasion in the complicated, racially tinged battle over territory.

Farmer died after being beaten, knifed and slashed with a machete. McShane survived but was severely wounded, having been stabbed with a bread knife.

At the time, Michael Rosa was nine years old and a student at Jacob H. Schiff elementary school (PS192) just across Broadway on 136th Street. His whole childhood and adolescence were spent in this violent milieu, where rival gangs patrolled the rooftops and streets of the rapidly changing neighborhood and were constantly after new recruits, new fighters for their ranks.

"The temptations of the street were awesome back then," recalled Nicholas Estavillo, a retired New York City police commander who, like Michael Rosa, came to the city from Puerto Rico in the early 1950s. "Not so much of the drug problem that it became later, but in the '50s and '60s there were a lot of gang issues. And there was a lot of pressure on someone like us, you know, to fall into that."

Michael Rosa's father Francisco was an abusive, 54-year-old retired Army and Army National Guard veteran who

was frequently absent from home and finally abandoned the family completely when Michael was 14 years old. After years of searching, Michael finally located his father in San Juan, Puerto Rico, veteran's hospital in 1977. "Michael wanted to visit him, to reconcile with him and to forgive him," recalled Becky (Rosa) Needham, Michael Rosa's second wife. But the father died in December of that year, before Michael Rosa could see him.

The mother, Hipolita Rosa, was an extremely protective and strict disciplinarian, who suffered from crippling rheumatoid arthritis that made negotiating the five flights of stairs to their top floor apartment extremely difficult. To protect him from the street scene, Hipolita mostly confined Michael to the apartment except for school and church. As he would most of his life, Michael took comfort in the company of pets and animals. He maintained homing pigeon coops on the flat roof of the apartment building in New York and later in homes in Maryland and Rock Springs, Wyoming.

In New York he also adopted a small dog. But this ended tragically when Hipolita, enraged that the children were not cleaning up its messes, threw the animal to its death out the fifth-floor window. Like many mistreated, abandoned and abused children, Michael continued throughout his life to seek the company of animals of all kinds. In Maryland where he worked in law enforcement and studied briefly at the state university in College Park, he kept a pet skunk, an iguana, two chow-chow dogs and even a mountain lion cub that he obtained by mail order, according to wife Becky. He moonlighted from his police job by hot-walking horses at the Laurel, Maryland, racetrack.

"The main thing I remember about him was that he loved animals," said daughter Roxanne, who was just five

years old when her father was killed. "I remember every weird pet he ever brought home. And I mean we owned a cougar and a skunk! I remember and I remember how happy it made him just to have the animals in the house."

Despite the temptations and the predations of the rough West Harlem neighborhood, Michael managed to avoid most of the mayhem. He sang in the church youth choir and he tended his homing pigeons. Like Ed Cantrell, he was physically gifted, lithe and quick. He boasted of outrunning gang members who chased him on the tenement rooftops and of how he could easily jump the four- or five-foot gap between buildings to avoid capture. A disabled veteran who lived two buildings down the street took an interest in the young man and offered fatherly counsel. A priest in a nearby parish also took him under his wing. "He taught me how to shake hands like a man," Michael told his wife Becky.

But while Michael escaped relatively unscathed, his younger brother Frankie did not. The younger Rosa fell first to the temptations of gang membership and later to heavy drugs, including heroin. By most accounts, this turned Michael permanently against drugs of any kind, including alcohol and tobacco. Later he would irritate his fellow police officers by telling them to snuff out their cigarettes. He refused to be in the same room when a relative smoked pot.

Later as an undercover narcotics officer he learned how to fake drug use. But his hatred for drugs and what they did to his brother, made him an effective and dependable enforcer. When Ed Cantrell shot him to death in 1978, Michael had a stemmed glass of red wine resting between his legs. But the autopsy showed not a trace of alcohol or any other drugs in his system. Investigators found some

drug paraphernalia in his belongings, but only that consistent with his undercover calling. No actual drugs.

After his father disappeared in 1964, Michael, then only 14, assumed the role of head of the household and took on the burden of rescuing his wayward brother. To earn money, Michael dropped out of high school and took a job in a New Jersey sheet metal shop. In 1966, he enlisted in the Marines, hoping he might find a way out of West Harlem.

The military escape route was a familiar path for young Puerto Ricans in New York City. The Marines in particular, with their macho image, attracted young Latinos.

"The Marine Corps provided an escape from the problems of the streets and the gangs," recalled Nicholas Estavillo, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran. "My family situation was probably the same as his. My mother didn't make very much money. We weren't surviving very well. And that's how the Marine Corps came into my mind, as an escape. And ultimately for me, it was."

When Michael Rosa decided to enlist in the Marine Corps, he was only 17 years old, too young to join without his parents' permission. With his father nowhere to be found, his mother dictated an affidavit statement to his marine recruiter, Staff Sgt. Elias P. Galvan.

"I, Hipolita Rosa, do hereby swear," the affidavit states, "that I am the mother of Miguel A. Rosa, and that I have had sole care and custody of him since February 1951.

"I further swear that my husband, Francisco Rosa, deserted his family on February 1951 and that his whereabouts have been unknown since March 1964."

The statement does not explain how Hipolita had time to give birth to four more children by Francisco after Michael was born in 1948 and before she said her husband abandoned her in 1951. Possibly it was a typographical error

by the recruiter, but it is more likely that Francisco abandoned the family in 1964 after making intermittent visits to West Harlem and fathering the children.

At any rate, Michael was inducted into the Marine Corps in August 1966, four months before his 18th birthday.

Earlier the same year, he had traveled to Quito, Ecuador to marry his first wife, Ecuadorian Blanca Marina Paredes, six years his senior, whom he had met in New York. The couple had two children, Angela, born in New York City, and Roberto, born in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

After basic training in Parris Island, South Carolina, Rosa was sent to Camp Pendleton, California for training as a "field wireman" specialist. In combat, a "wireman" is assigned to maintain hard line or wire communication lines between headquarters and artillery or mortar units and forward positions. It involves literally *running* wire to a forward spotter, the runner usually carrying a field radio and armed only with a .45-caliber pistol. The bulky equipment made the Vietnam "wire dogs" easy targets. It was a very dangerous specialty.

After his specialty training, Rosa was assigned to a Marine mortar battery under the 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, 3rd Marine Division and sent to Vietnam. In 1967 and 1968 his unit rotated in and out of the hottest spots in South Vietnam, the hilltop village of Con-Thien, just south of the Demilitarized Zone in Quang Tri province. In Vietnamese, the name *còn-thiên* means "Hill of Heaven". It was anything but.

Part of the problem was that the Marine fire base was only three kilometers from North Vietnam and within range of People's Army of Vietnam artillery north of the DMZ. Rosa told friends that two of his Marine buddies were blown up by these enemy artillery blasts. Rosa worked with

American troops with the 9th Marines as well as South Vietnamese units. While at Con-Thien he trained with several weapons including M-16s, as well as 50-caliber and M-60 machine guns.

Just as he had in West Harlem, he exited Vietnam relatively unscathed. His chest was adorned with campaign medals. His biggest physical complaint was jungle rot. But like most returning soldiers who had seen combat, he seldom talked about his war experiences. He told Becky that he felt sorry for the Vietnamese children and that he once intervened when some of his fellow Marines amused themselves by throwing c-ration cans of food at the kids gathered around their vehicles.

While in Vietnam he was sent to Camp S.D. Butler on Okinawa for three weeks of NCO training and promoted to sergeant. Later, after he returned to the U.S., he was recommended for promotion to staff sergeant. It was a relatively rapid rise for a young high school dropout from West Harlem. He scored very well on training and aptitude examinations and while in the military obtained his GED high school equivalency degree.

In his last regular Marine job as "field wire" instructor at Camp Lejeune, he received high marks from his commanding officer.

"This man is an excellent instructor and fine Sergeant," Marine Capt. T.F. Searle wrote. "He devotes much of his otherwise free time to those of his students who may be having difficulties in their studies. His personal appearance is above reproach and he is very good in handling enlisted personnel. Sgt Rosa has excellent growth potential and he is qualified for promotion to Staff Sergeant."

After finishing his three-year regular tour of duty, Rosa transferred to the Marine reserves and moved to the Mary-

land suburbs outside Washington, D.C. with his first wife Blanca and their two children.

The marriage was seriously troubled, but everything else seemed to be falling into place for the young marine veteran. He obtained a release from his Marine reserve duties to work as an undercover narcotics agent for the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, D.C., with the promise that if he performed well, he would be eligible to become a regular officer.

"As an undercover officer," Rosa would later write in a letter to then D.C. police chief Jerry Wilson, "I laid my life on the line and never regretted it."

After his undercover work he was sent to the D.C. police academy where he again performed very well, serving as "class leader," winning the physical fitness award, and finishing third in his class scholastically. He accomplished this despite often missing classes because he was called to testify in court cases resulting from his drug arrests as an undercover agent.

On May 18, 1970, he was sworn in as a regular police officer in the nation's capital, assigned to the 6th District, 11th Precinct. He had found a job he liked and the future looked bright.