

I Lived in a Slum

Sickening Story Unfolds In City's Blighted Areas

By ROBERT H. PRALL,
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

More than one million people are living in the filth and squalor of New York City's slums. The blighted areas of overcrowded, rundown homes are spreading farther and farther through the city.

Although the Welfare Department spends \$16 million a month to help some of these destitute families, thousands upon thousands of them are trapped in festering tenements, rooming houses and ramshackle dwellings.

To learn at first hand what it's like to live with the rats and roaches of the slums, the World-Telegram assigned staff writer and housing investigator Woody Klein to spend a month in three of the worst slum areas—the upper West Side, the lower East Side and and Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Mr. Klein took an assumed name—Ben Clarke. He said he was an unemployed actor from Los Angeles who came here to look for work on the stage. He grew a stubble of beard, donned dirty khaki pants and a torn shirt. Then he moved into a slum rooming house and began his assignment.

In the long days and longer nights that followed, Mr. Klein went from flat to flat to talk to the people who exist in the dingy, overcrowded rooms for which they often were charged exorbitant rents.

He ate and drank with the slum dwellers and listened as they described their frustration and their fear. He was sickened by the nauseating smell of the slums and by the dreadful, unsanitary bathroom facilities in many of the buildings.

He talked to old people living out their last years in



Photos by Ford.

Staff writer Woody Klein as he appears, above, in his normal street attire, and, at right, as he appeared during the month he spent in the city's slums.

dreary rooms, no bigger than oversized closets. He talked to children whose only toys were wine and whisky bottles tossed away by neighborhood drunks. He talked to the ill and the feeble-minded.

Applies for Relief.

Like many slum tenants, Mr. Klein applied for relief from the Welfare Department. He sought unemployment benefits from the state. He accepted no money from city or state. From those already on relief, he learned the tragedy of families forced to use their food money for excessive rentals charged by many slumlords. There were times when Mr.



Klein, revolted by the human misery he found, regretted having undertaken the mission. But he stayed on until he completed his research.

His series of articles, illustrated with photographs taken in the horror houses, will start tomorrow in the World-Telegram.

I Lived in a Slum

'At Home' in a Filthy Cage

Family Is Trapped in West Side's Jungle

More than a million people live in the filth and squalor of New York City's slums. They live a miserable life in unsanitary, decaying, overcrowded buildings infested with rodents and roaches. Just last week in Harlem a 4-year-old girl's hands and left ear were bitten by rats two nights in a row. To get the inside story of what it's like in the slums, the World-Telegram assigned staff writer Woody Klein to live a month in three of the worst areas of blight in the city. A series of articles based on his experiences starts today.

By **WOODY KLEIN**,
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

I was sitting in a dark, flooded basement apartment in the heart of the Upper West Side "jungle" during a heavy rainstorm. Water was coming in through holes in the roof, pouring down the walls of the five-story building and forming a pool three inches deep on the wooden floor.

The air was stifling in the windowless flat. If there was any ventilation at all, it came from a rathole in the wall. Greasy dishes and cooking utensils were strewn throughout the crammed area which served as both living room and kitchen.

One adjoining room, 8 by 10 feet, contained a double bed for three of the tenants and a crib for the 24-day-old baby. The only clean article in the room was the baby's birth certificate which, framed in glass, hung proudly on a wall.

Sitting dejectedly on a wooden crate near the doorway, his pants rolled up to his bony knees to escape the rising water, was a frail, pathetic-looking little man. This was Jose, the superintendent of the building.

He ran his fingers through his long black hair and muttered dispiritedly, "It's a mess, isn't it? Six months I live in this hole. All I want is to move up one flight but the landlord don't listen. He says the super must live in the cellar."

I was horrified by the thought of a family trapped in this filthy cage. I had selected at random this room-

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Photo by Ford.

This is World-Telegram reporter Woody Klein in his first slum room on W. 84th St. The "furnished" room contained a greasy stove, a filthy sink, table and chair, an old refrigerator, a small bed—and the sickening smell of the slums.

I Lived in a Slum

Rains Flood West Side Jungle Home

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ing house on W. 84th St. as my first "home" in the slums of New York City and Jose was the first neighbor I talked to.

Earlier that day I had rented a \$10-a-week room on the third floor of the tenement. The room was an evil-smelling hovel that contained an old iron bed, a moldy, torn mattress, a dresser lacking one drawer, a small, filthy sink, a stove decked with layers of grease and a smelly refrigerator.

There was one toilet for the six apartments on my floor but Jose advised me not to use it. I took one look and understood why. If I had been revolted by what I had seen through out the rest of the building, I was sickened by the condition of that bathroom. I was prepared for anything, I thought, when I took my assignment, but not this. I threw up.

But this was just the beginning of my revulsion at life in the slums. In the days that followed I was appalled by the despair of forgotten people by the prostitution, the dope traffic, petty thievery and the lack of order or purpose in the lives of so many helpless families.

A Fact Accepted.

Like other New Yorkers, I had accepted the fact that slums are a part of a big city. But when I found myself on the inside—living with the mass of people who are forced to reside in unsanitary, dilapidated structures—I truly understood the tragedy of poor housing.

In the days—and, often, sleepless nights—of my life in the slums, I found:

- **Rent gouging and exploitation**—Tenants forced to pay excessive rentals, in many cases as high as \$100 a month, for dirty, broken-down, foul-smelling flats.

Privacy Impossible.

- **Animal-like overcrowding**—Scores of families piled on top of each other so closely that any semblance of personal privacy is impossible; children sleeping at their parents' feet; a father and his seven children living in a room and a half flat which contained two double beds.

- **Personal neglect**—People ignoring the basic habits of daily cleanliness by failing to comb their hair, to brush their teeth, to clean their clothes, to wash themselves. One woman, the mother of three children, casually told me she hadn't taken a bath or a shower in eight years. If she washed her youngsters at all, she did it in the kitchen sink.

- **Narcotics traffic**—Fuse boxes in tenements used as depositories for hypodermic needles and dope; unlocked hallway toilets where, tenants said, dope addicts took their needles; boys and girls smoking and peddling marijuana cigarettes.

Open Solicitation.

- **Prostitution**—Open solicitation in the hallways and rooms of the tenements at all hours of the day and night.

- **Gambling**—Wide-open dice and card games, policy rackets flourishing.

- **Drunkenness**—An appalling number of men and women stupefied by wine, beer and cheap whisky purchased with money strangled from their relief or unemployment checks; and, in the long hours of the night, a continuous rain of bottles hurled from windows into the streets and courtyards below.

Object Poverty.

- **Extreme poverty**—Families of four persons on relief unable to feed, house and clothe themselves adequately on a monthly allowance of \$177. In many homes, food money was buying wine and cheap whisky.

- **Fire hazards**—Garbage cans, rubbish and furniture block the roof and hallway exits in many tenements; windows and doors leading to fire escapes jammed so badly they can't be opened.

- **Building violations**—Cracked walls and ceilings, un-

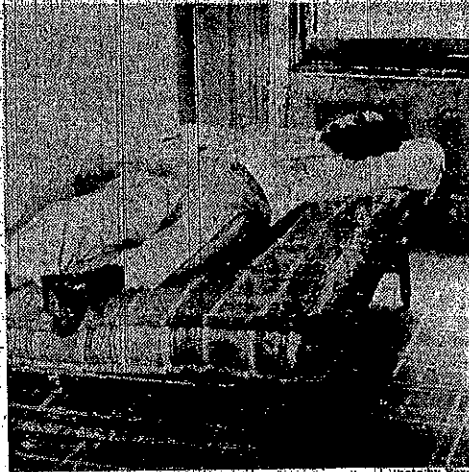


Photo by Ford.

On the first day of his assignment last month, reporter Woody Klein tries out his moldy mattress prior to covering it with gray, streaked sheets. He was to spend several sleepless nights here.

sanitary toilets with cracked bowls and seats missing, water pipes corroded and leaking, electrical wiring exposed, window panes and sashes broken, shaky stairways and railings.

Thieves' Paradise.

- **Petty thievery**—Wholesale complaints from tenants that radios, clothes and personal effects were stolen.

All these gross signs of lowly, miserable, spiritless living were even more shocking from the inside than I had ever imagined. After three years of covering housing stories for this newspaper, I thought I knew the slums.

But only now do I realize how deep and terrible the slum problem is. More than anything else, the thing that depressed me and made me want to quit the assignment at the end of each day was the overpowering smell of the slums.

The Poisoned Air.

It's the nauseating mish mash of garbage, decayed food, stale urine and excrement, rotten wood and furniture, rat dirt and the sweat of filthy people. It creeps out of the walls and poisons the air you breathe; it seeps into your skin and crawls into bed with you at night; it infests the streets and sidewalks of the neighborhood.

I lived with this odor. It became a part of me. I wore a pair of old slacks and a dirty, torn shirt during my assignment and it took three washings to get the smell out of my clothes.

The odor hung in my nostrils, worked its way into my stomach. I lost eight pounds during my month in the slums because I simply couldn't eat.

But on those dismal days when I wanted to drop the whole thing, I thought about the million people—1,132,000 to be exact—who were jammed in this squalor with me. I knew that in the richest city in the world they were the forgotten families in 36,000 tenements sprawled throughout the five boroughs. I knew their stories should be told.

TOMORROW: (Upper West Side Story)

Staff writer Woody Klein describes his new neighbors in the house on 84th St.

I Lived in a Slum

Bugs Reign in Squalor

Select West Side Area Becomes Hodge-Podge Of Blighted Dwellings

More than a million people live in the filth and squalor of New York City's slums. They live a miserable life in insanitary, decaying, overcrowded buildings infested with rodents and roaches. Just last week in Harlem a 4-year-old girl's hands and left ear were bitten by rats two nights in a row. To get the inside story of what it's like in the slums, the World-Telegram assigned staff writer Woody Klein to live a month in three of the worst areas of blight in the city. A series of articles based on his experiences continues today.

By **WOODY KLEIN**,
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

Twenty years ago W. 84th St. was a "good address" in a highly respectable neighborhood inhabited by successful, middle-class residents of New York City. It was clean, well-kept, a community of traditional four and five-story brownstones.

But neglect, indifference and subsequent deterioration have lowered this once-select area to a hodge-podge of rooming houses and dreary apartment buildings.

A few modern apartments defy the decay of the neighborhood but they are the exception.

Actually, what has happened on W. 84th St. has happened in many sections of the city. The slums are gobbling up residential areas faster than new low-cost housing units are being constructed.

Population Falls.

The City Planning Commission says it this way: Every year 11,000 individual apartments deteriorate into slums while only 5500 new low-cost public housing units are built to replace them.

While the over-all population of New York City decreased from 7,891,957 in 1950 to 7,870,000 in 1958, the city's population in slum housing climbed from 899,200 in 1950 to 1,132,000 in 1958.

And in the last eight years, while the number of

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Staff Writer Woody Klein helps a child of the slum take her baby carriage down a tenement stairway. He dolls are the wine and whisky bottles tossed away by neighborhood drunks.

Photo by Ford

I Lived in a Slum

Bugs Reign in Squallor of West Side Building

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slum apartments rose from 250,000 to 365,000—an increase of 75,000. It spent 39,000 low-cost units were constructed.

Boasting the Battle of the Slums

The city is boasting the Battle of the Slums. It erected, as my first home on the Upper West Side slum, a four-story rooming house on W. 84th St. I picked the worst-looking building I could find. It was a four-story brownstone. The glass in the front door was broken. Windows were cracked and the sidewalk around the doorway was marked with cobblestoning.

I had allowed my hair to grow long and I was unshaven. I wore old slacks and a dirty shirt in my role as an unemployed actor in need of a "cheap" place to stay. I looked Jose, the superintendent, in his walkway basement apartment and he let me upstairs.

The place infuriated me. The narrow, gray, jalousie were littered with cigarette butts and spit. Dirty paint was peeling from the walls and ceiling. A 15-watt bulb barely illuminated the dark passageway.

Landlady Horrible

When we got to my room and I saw the terrible condition of my mattress, I asked Jose. It was a better one. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not so good," he said, "but I see what I can do. All the rooms the same here. The landlord, he don't care. We live like dogs."

As we were talking, I felt something crawling up my leg. I pulled up my trousers and saw an enormous cockroach on the skin above my sock. Revolted, I slapped the roach away. Jose laughed.

"A cockroach," he said. "You get used to them. We have them all the time."

But if the cockroach disgusted me, the incident faded. The first night when I went to bed, I began to itch all over. I pulled the sheet to the light bulb in the ceiling, yanked the sheet off the bed and examined the mattress. It was crawling with bedbugs.

Sleep was impossible so I sat and read—and listened to the night noises of the slum. In the room next to mine, a radio blared long into the night. Babies cried. A family quarrel started down the hall and a woman screamed obscenities. Someone was pounding on a door, according to be her in. Hours later, bottles and beer cans crashed in the alley below.

It was the worst night I had ever known. In the morning I left my dismal room and visited some of my new neighbors. I wanted to learn how families could live in such an environment.

Invited for Visit

I knocked on a door down the hall and a round-faced Puerto Rican woman appeared. I told her I was new in the house and wanted to talk with someone. She invited me inside.

Mrs. C. lives with her four children in two small rooms which have windows facing a brick wall. She told me her husband deserted her. This top-floor woman pays \$47.50 every two weeks—approximately \$100 a month. I was amazed. For my own two-and-a-half-room Greenwich Village apartment is an area much in demand. I pay only \$32.

"Can she live on her \$102 bi-monthly payment from the Welfare Department?" No. She says she doesn't have enough money to clothe her children. She had to keep them home from school several times during the winter because they don't own overcoats or rubbers.

Her troubles are aggravated by the fact that her 7-year-



Reporter Woody Klein stands in slum hallway where one tenement (arrow) serves a half-dozen families. Garbage can in corridor, at left, is a time hazard. Photo by Ford.

old daughter is chronically ill with a stomach ailment that has required the child to undergo three operations since birth. Another neighbor, a 29-year-old woman, had three illegitimate children, all by different fathers.

\$175 in Support. The woman received \$175 a month to support herself and the three children. And her landlord was squeezing more than \$80 a month out of her allotment for her one miserable room which contained a bed, a crib and a broken-down dresser.

"I can't get out much," said Mrs. R. "I have no carriage for the baby so I have to stay inside and watch her here. I can't even look for another apartment. What's the use, anyway? I don't find anything better in this neighborhood. All the apartments are the same, all the houses are the same. We can't do any better."

The few people in the house held regular jobs; most of them were on relief or drawing unemployment insurance. One neighbor on the second floor, a dishwasher out of work, had just \$3.60 in his pocket, and his first unemployment check was 70 days away. He and his wife and two children were packed into a tiny room that was nothing more than an oversized closet. The man was feeling desperate.

if don't want to hold up anybody," he told me. "I don't

do that. I never take anything that don't belong to me. But I think of it. I think of it all the time."

A woman down the hall apparently had given up. Her neighbors told me that she and her three small children seemed never to leave their room. One bright, sunny afternoon I knocked on her door and a thin, haggard woman appeared.

"Excuse me, lady," I said. "I'm new in the neighborhood. Can you tell me where I can buy some food cheap?"

"No cheap food," she replied.

Shades Drawn. I looked behind her to discover that the shades were tightly drawn over the windows. Three naked, dirty children sat on an unmade bed staring at a television program. The air in the flat was foul.

"Don't you ever leave this place?" I asked. "It's nice outside. Why don't you let the kids play in the sun?" She slammed the door in my face.

Tomorrow

Staff writer Woody Klein describes the lower East Side neighborhood known as "Korea."

An Editorial

Frankly, We're Shocked Too!

This is probably the first time we've ever asked our readers to refer to yesterday's paper. But we emphatically urge just that for any readers who may have missed reading the opening article in Woody Klein's "I Lived in a Slum" series.

Seldom has a story revealed in such dramatic and explicit terms the atrocious conditions under which more than a million New Yorkers live. Today's article and those that will follow present further shocking documentation of a great city's shame.

Naturally, we have not been oblivious to the existence of slums in New York—but this account of slum life from a skilled, perceptive reporter who actually lived in these hovels has shocked even the editors of this newspaper. It is almost incredible that such conditions could exist in New York City in 1959 A.D.

Many of our readers, we believe, also have had only a passing acquaintance, if that, with slum conditions. We think these articles will affect them profoundly, making them truly aware and conscious for the first time of what tenement fifth and stench are really like.

No doubt the Commies will make what they can of these revelations. Let them. We don't happen to believe in giving the seamiest aspects of city life the under-the-rug treatment. That is not the route toward curing these evils. Only an informed and enlightened public can provide the cure.

It's true enough that the Wagner administration cannot be held completely to blame for these dismaying slum conditions. The slums have been with us for many decades. Yet it is a fact that this cancer has flourished and spread during this administration while so-called slum clearance programs have by-passed the worst areas and reached for relatively presentable sections to raze and remake.

The salient question raised by Mr. Klein's harrowing account of his days and nights in New York hovels is, of course: How can these awful conditions be corrected?

The answer must come not merely from government, not merely from the town's host of civic organizations—but from the people of New York in the largest sense. And we believe it will come when the people realize the full, horrible dimensions of this unconscionable situation.

I Lived in a Slum

Tenants Battle to Survive In Lower East Side's 'Korea'

More than a million people live in the filth and squalor of New York City's slums. They live a miserable life in unsanitary, decaying, overcrowded buildings infested with rodents and roaches. Only today a 2-month-old boy died of rat bites in Coney Island. Last week in Harlem a 4-year-old girl was badly bitten by rats two nights in a row. To get the inside story of what it's like in the slums the World-Telegram assigned staff writer Woody Klein to live a month in three of the worst areas of blight in the city. A series of articles based on his experiences continues today.

By **WOODY KLEIN**,
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

Francisco and his seven small children are trapped in a dingy, unventilated two-room flat in a cankerous community called "Korea" in the Lower East Side.

Francisco was one of the first tenants I met after I became a slum dweller in that area of the city last month. My \$10-a-week hole in the wall in a cheap rooming house on Forsyth St. was barren, rat infested.



The whole five-story structure was one big garbage can—fly-covered garbage in the hallways, filth in the four "community" toilets used by more than 30 boarders, and a terrible stench rising from the roach-infested stoves in the hallway kitchens. The heat was stifling.

Francisco's building around the corner on Eldridge St. was no better. But if the physical conditions were bad, they were dwarfed by his personal burdens. Surrounded by his seven glassy-eyed children, Francisco broke into tears as he talked with me.

"Somebody gotta help me," he said. "I gotta do something about the kids and I gotta get out of this bad place."

Francisco left the sugar cane fields of Puerto Rico

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Two drooping figures tell the story of the city's slums. They walk a path to nowhere.

Photo by Ford.

I Lived in a Slum Tenants Fight for Life on East Side

(Continued From Page One)

10 years ago and came here living up at the hundreds of it with his wife and three children, figures crowding the dren. Now there are seven tenement fire escapes in a building ranging in age from 14 to 12, the effort to cool off. He for a while he made a decent seemed immune to everything living as a construction worker around him, but he was laid off last year. "You don't see anything today he gets \$39 a month as after a while," he said. "It's the superintendent of several a jungle full of animals. I don't slum buildings and a \$64 well-know where to begin. See those fare check every two weeks, pretty young dames over there. "All the places we live in are playing hooky from school? very bad," he said. "Ten years they could be beautiful when ago I see the man about move they grow up but they're ing into a housing project. Six junkies. They're selling dope times I apply but I never hear and they're taking the stuff from anybody. Are my kids themselves." stuck here for the rest of their lives?"

Hears of Dope Traffic.

There were many times I wished I had an answer for when I was told of the nar- Francisco but I didn't. And comes traffic in the slums. One his problems didn't stop here: afternoon I was talking with Two months ago Francisco's a Negro woman in her three- wife walked out on him and room apartment which housed went to live with another man, a total of five adults and five "Now I gotta stay home with children. She was complaining the seven kids and take care about the hallway toilet. of them," he continued. "How I don't like to use it and I can I do my job? Nobody worry about the kids using it. come to help me. I tell the I've found men in there stick Welfare man my wife walking themselves with those out. They say they send wom needles. They were taking an around but nobody show dope. And they hide their up. I tell you I don't know needles in the fuse boxes in what I'm going to do." the hallways."

Francisco, I learned was an Army veteran who saw service safe around here. This neigh- In the Pacific. And before I bohood has gone down and left him. I asked him why his down in the past 10 years. Why don't they do something about it? The city just gives up.

"Because it's a battle ground," he replied. "The peo- And I discovered from talk- ple here gotta fight for every- ing with the people trapped in thing they get and they fight this wasteland, a lot of them among themselves on the have just about given up too streets. Cops come but go away. Too much fighting all at a holy-poly Italian woman. the time." atashed away in a two-room crevice in the rear of a brick tenement, told me of her home

Domestic Fights Erupt.

When I left Francisco I shook his limp hand and smiled at the children. The seven little faces looked up at me as though I was the only hope they had.

Korea was just what Francisco said it was. Wine-soaked bums, spilling over from the Bowery near by, brawled in the cheap bars or slept in the gar- bage-strewn gutters. Domestic fights erupted continuously. I saw one drunken woman flail- ing her husband with a golf club. I saw an old man, who neighbors said had been knifed, lying bleeding on the sidewalk to await an ambulance.

At the corner of Forsyth and Rivington Streets, I talked to a policeman who was gaze-

There was no heat in the building during the winter.

She had no hot water in her one sink.

There was no bath tub or shower in the entire four-story building.

I was appalled.

"How do you wash the chil- dren?" I asked incredulously.

"How do you bathe yourself?"

The woman, unperturbed by the question, shrugged her shoulders. Then she replied:

"I put the kids in the sink. Myself, I take a sponge bath and I stick my legs in the sink."

"But can you get clean this way?" I asked.

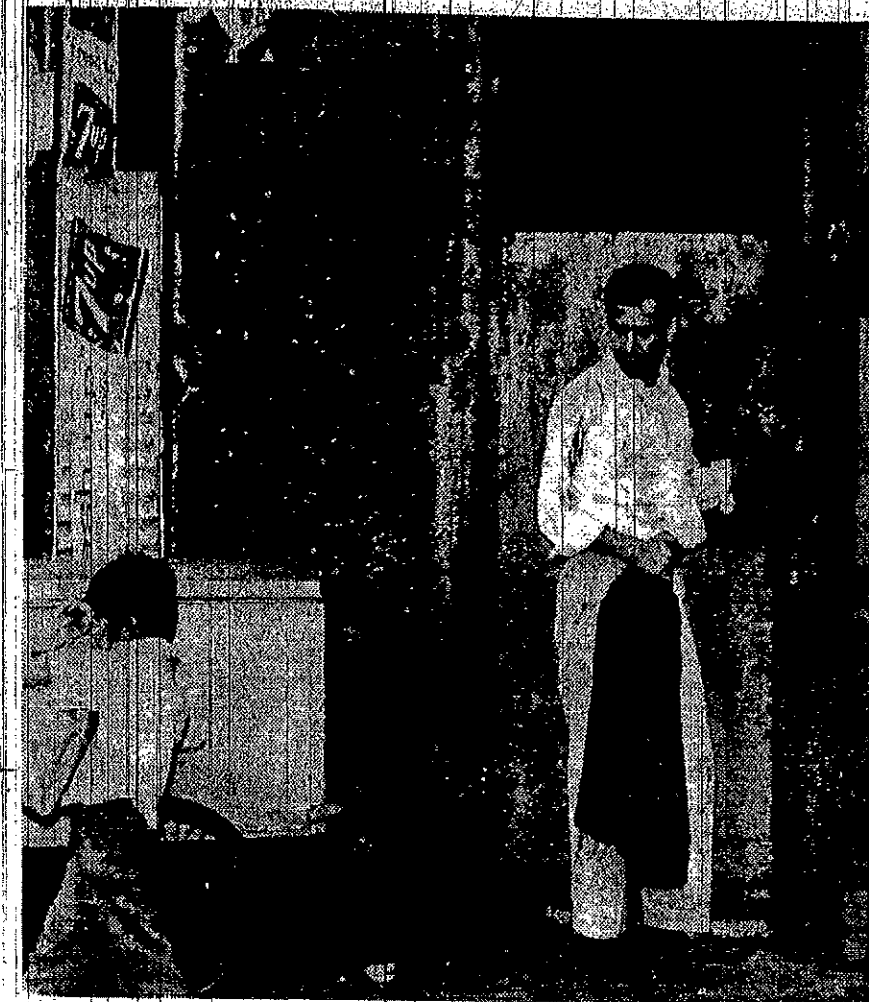
"Mister," she said slowly, "I

haven't taken a bath or a shower for eight years."

When I recovered from that answer, I switched the con- versation to the rent she had to pay for her flat. Eight years ago, she said, it cost her \$16.50 a month; today it's \$30.50. All she had to show for this, she said, was a refrigerator.

The real tragedy of this par- ticular home, however, was not the woman but her three small children. She was friendly enough to me but she took out her inner aggressions against her youngsters.

"You goddam kids," she shrieked at them. "You're no good and I'm stuck with you. Stop your hollering and shout-



Photos by Ford

A small boy, bringing home groceries to his mother, catches the attention of reporter Woody Klein as he enters the front door of his Lower East Side "home."

ing and "stop wetting your beach. I ain't seen a movie in pants. Do something, but get three years."

They dashed off, ducking, and the Italian woman went out of my hair."

"It's bad enough to have to sleep in the same bed with the baby. It's like sleeping with an octopus. But it's the mice and the roaches that climb over the bed. And now and then a big rat comes out of the wall. That's why I always sleep with the lights on."

I asked the woman if she ever left her apartment.

"Not much," she replied. "My old man left me four years ago and I'm left with these stinking kids. I don't even know how to get to the

Tomorrow

Staff writer Woody Klein writes of people in Williamsburg who say "we ain't really alive."