GRAHAM BEZANT / TORONTO STAR

Street corner businessman selling rabbits out of the back of his truck is just part of the smells, the crowds, the commotion and the sounds that make Kensington Market a marvellous shoppers paradise for Metro's immigrant population.

They're all coming home to Kensington for party

By Sol Littman Toronto Star

Edith Farber vividly recalls the crowds, the commotion, the smell of fish and the squawk of chickens on Thursday nights in Kensington Market where she lived as a child.

"In those days, around 1925, almost all the shoppers were Jews preparing for the Sabbath," she says. The women would buy live chickens crowded in wooden cages on the sidewalk. After blowing the feathers and feeling the breasts to see that they were tender and plump, they took their choice to the ritual slaughterer to be killed.

"The chickens beat their wings, the feathers flew and the pavement was littered with chicken droppings. Large barrels of brine-soaked sour pickles stood in front of the grocery store. You poked your hand into the brine to feel for a firm pickle."

Goods were goods

The wife of Sam Farber, a successful Toronto businessman, moved out of the Kensington Market neighborhood, 54 years ago, when she was 15. Today, she lives with her husband in an expensive north Toronto high rise.

"The shops weren't highly specialized," she recalls. "The Litvacks sold groceries and hardware. The Litowitzes ran a drygoods store that was known in the neighborhood as Little Eaton's. It was a jumble of woollen underwear, cut-glass vases, men's suspenders, barber scissors and Jewish prayer shawls."

As hundreds of former Kensington Market residents will discover when they gather this Friday, Saturday and Sunday at St. Stephen's Community House on Belleview Ave. for a walking tour of the neighborhood bordered by Spadina Ave. and Bathurst, College and Dundas Sts., the market is still noisy, crowded and dirty.

The chickens still squawk in their cages, the fish stores are still grimy and dank. Vegetable stands, clothing stores and appliance stores still hawk their wares at the sidewalk's edge.

The customers, largerly of European origin, still crowd the pavement and flow onto the roadway as they greet friends and haggle with the shopkeepers.

Metamorphoses

Here and there, old-timers will note changes in this unique Metro neighborhood. Halperin's drugstore which stood, seemingly forever, at Spadina Ave. and Nassau St. has become Kwong's Drugs.

Goodman's Paint and Hardware has become Daniel's Art Supplies and show Chinese landscape paintings in its windows.

Cibelman's Fish Market is now owned by Portuguese. A parking garage has replaced many of the old Baldwin St. houses. George Brown College's Kensington campus crowds the space once occupied by William Houston School.

But, at heart, Kensington Market remains what it always was, an area where the children of poor immigrants become outstanding Canadians.

By their bootstraps

"The area has produced great street athletes like (North York Mayor) Mel Lastman and great boxers like Sammy Luftspring and Baby Yack," says chartered accountant Lou Tepperman, who spent the first 19 years of his life in Kensington Market.

"The Himel family produced two lawyers and one doctor, Sydney Irving. . . . and Henry, the chief of obstetrics at Mount Sinai Hospital. Abraham Rappaport is chief of medicine at Western Hospital.

"Sandy Rakoff produced ...ows for CBC, Murray Rumack serves on a committee that advises the federal government on taxation policies. Abie Bell proved to be a scientific genius who helped put up Telstar."

Nostalgia, Tepperman warns, should not blind people to the poverty of people in the area.

"My father was a milkman who delivered milk on a horse-drawn wagon. The nag's stable was behind the house.

"During the Depression, my father's business failed because his customers couldn't afford to pay him for the milk and he couldn't afford to buy it from the dairies.

Bleak bundling

"Our house was old and on the verge of being condemned. During the winter, we banked furnace ashes around the foundation to keep the cold out. We slept four in a bed and rented out the spare rooms to boarders.

"There were rats and lice in the house and frequent health department quarantine signs nailed to the door warning of whooping cough, chicken pox, measles and scarlet fever.

"Most of us worked like mad to get out because anything was better than staying there."

The Abkin candy store once stood on the northeast corner of Nassau and Augusta Sts. and men on the way to daily prayers at the numerous small synagogues in the area would stop there to buy a Jewish newspaper.

Obit first

"The first thing they would look at was the obituaries," says Deborah Cass, whose mother, Rachel Abkin, ran the family store. "That way they knew in the morning if they would attend a funeral at noon.

"Since most of them worked in the clothing shops on Spadina, it was possible to run over to the funeral parlor on College during their lunch hour."

A rubust, energetic blonde woman, Mrs. Abkin opened the store early and closed it late.

"The only time she didn't open was the day my brother died, the day I was married and the day my husband, Elie, graduated from medical school," her daughter says.

On one side of the store, Mrs. Cass said, stood the penny-candy counter filled with four-for-a-cent caramel squares, chocolate babies in pink marshmallow blankets, licorice whistles and rows of shiny candy-buttons, attached to paper sheets.

"The World-Problem Solving Conference met at the small tables in the back of the store — a group of regulars who gathered to play dominoes and argue the day's news," she said.

Political refugees

"They were intelligent, concerned people," she says. "Our physical surroundings may have been poor but there was nothing slummy about the people."

Between 1904 and 1925, the Abkins' gained neighbors by the thousands. Refugees from Czarist Russian pogroms and Bolshevik upheaval, they occupied the battered row houses built originally for Irish workmen on streets with fancy English names such as Kensington, Baldwin, Nassau and Augusta.

They settled close to the clothing factories along Spadina that gave them work. Separated by language and religion from the rest of the population they created their own institutions: Trade unions, synagogues, credit unions, burial societies and religious schools.

They converted the fronts of their ramshackle houses into stores that their wives and children tended. They lined the narrow streets with their pushcarts.

City officials frowned. The health department complained of chicken droppings on the sidewalks and fish scales in the gutter. The fire department despaired of bringing trucks into the jumble of stalls and rickety shops. The legal department was apoplectic about merchants displaying their goods on public streets. The cleaning department moaned about the dirt and the police despaired of keeping traffic moving.

City planners dreamed of tearing it all down and starting over again.

Then, during the 1960s came the realization at Toronto City Council that cleanliness and order weren't everything. For all its dirt and clutter, Kensington Market was an asset, a tourist attraction, our equivalent of London's Petticoat Lane and Amsterdam's Thieves' Market.

The Litvacks and Litowitzes were retiring. Their children had long left the area. In their place came Portuguese immigrants — men like Antonio Sousa, who opened the first Portuguese restaurant in Toronto in 1955.

The poultry in cages and the vegetable stands on the street appealed to Sousa, he says, reminding him of Nazare, his home village, north of Lisbon.

Under his leadership more Portuguese settled near Kensington Market. They refurbished the houses, planted cabbages in the front yards and painted the old red brick blue and green and purple.

"We followed the Jewish pattern of organizing clubs and associations. We opened the first Portuguese school in Canada. We established folk-dance groups to keep the old country heritage alive.

"It has worked well. The Portuguese in Kensington Market have prospered."

Like most Kensington Market settlers, Sousa is proud of his start there but is happy he no longer lives there.

Bettering themselves

"Kensington was a great teacher," he says, "but the air in Mississauga doesn't smell as bad and there are no cockroaches.

"I'm now chiefly an importer. My brother is a physician. One son is a school teacher. The other wants to go into business but not in what he calls 'the peanut business.'

"It was always my intention to give my children more than I had."

Although he no longer has a business in Kensington, Sousa is still drawn to the area.

"Every day I must go there to buy my bread and my eggs and say hello to Solly Zimmerman and the other Kensington businessmen," he says. "It's a ritual like walking through the town square of Nazare every day to greet the townspeople."

On the heels of the Portuguese came a sprinkling of West-Indian storekeepers to provide the yams, spices and goat meat so loved in the Islands.

At the same time, the Chinese immigrant population was expanding rapidly. Chinese restaurants, yard-goods and basket shops began to line Spadina and Dundas.

From the Orient

"Many of them began to buy houses in the area, living on the ground floor and renting rooms to Chinese students," says Shirley Hoy, the young China-born social worker who directs St. Stephen's Community House.

"Most are working people. The wives work in the clothing factories and the husbands are cooks and waiters in nearby Chinese resturants," she says.

"It probably won't take too many years before they, too, move up and out and Kensington Market will be the staging area for yet another immigrant population," she says.

"I can't think of any other 16-block area in Canada that presents so many difficulties and has produced so many, worthwhile, prominent Canadians."