

# FAMILY PROPERTIES

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HOW THE STRUGGLE OVER RACE  
AND REAL ESTATE TRANSFORMED  
CHICAGO AND URBAN AMERICA

BERYL SATTER

Picador

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A METROPOLITAN BOOK



Mark J. Satter with unidentified woman (probably a client, probably around 1958). Date, place, photographer unknown.

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## INTRODUCTION

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# THE STORY OF MY FATHER

When an elderly woman erupts into shouts of rage at the mere mention of events now forty years past, you know there is a story there. In the winter of 2000 I asked my aunt what had become of my father's buildings after he died. I should have known by then that nothing connected with my father—or with property, especially property owned by Jews in black neighborhoods, and especially in Chicago—was simple.

I was six years old when my father died. He had a heart condition that slowly destroyed him. On his third hospital stay, with his wife and one of his sons at his side, Mark J. Satter went into convulsions. At around 2:00 a.m., he called out words of warning: "Look out! Later! Watch it!" And then he died. It was July 12, 1965. He was forty-nine years old.

A period of confusion followed. At first, my mother tried to talk to me and my older brothers and sisters about the man my father had been. He was an independent attorney who used the law to help the poor—black people in particular; our family was on the side of black people. He was respected in our city, and we should be proud to be his children. Although my mother was never very specific about my father's accomplishments, I had reason to believe her. She framed an editorial obituary that was published in the *Chicago Daily News*. "Satter

that was a good thing. And then there were the condolence letters. There were stacks of them. They praised Mark J. Satter as the city's conscience. They told my mother that her loss was the city's loss as well. They insisted that her husband was a great man and that his legacy would not be forgotten.

It wasn't long, however, before discussion of my father ceased almost entirely. My sisters and I squirmed with discomfort on the occasions that our mother mentioned him. He had "passed away," my mother said, so why did we need to hear about him? The rare comments my aunts and uncles made about him grew increasingly negative. He left my mother in a terrible state, bankrupt and dependent on Social Security checks, Jewish social services, and one of my uncles for financial support. How could he do that to her? The recollections of my two older brothers, who had been sixteen and seventeen when my father died, turned bitter. "He was driven to run a race that he could not win," my brother David recalled. "Unfortunately, he pulled the rest of us into it with him."

And then there were the buildings. My father had owned several apartment buildings in Lawndale, an old Jewish neighborhood on Chicago's West Side that had become almost entirely black by the late 1950s. They had been sold, I eventually learned, shortly after my father's death. A friend of his named Irving Block had helped my mother get rid of them. But the sale had brought nothing to the family, not even money to pay the properties' coal bills.

The talk about the buildings confused me. I had heard scraps of discussion about these mysterious structures from earliest childhood. My brother Paul would mention them to my mother, it seemed to me, mainly to upset her. "Why did you sell the buildings? Everything would have been fine if you hadn't sold them!" I would chime in, too: "What buildings?" I would press. "Nothing, never mind, don't bother me! Don't talk to me about those buildings!" my mother would respond, her voice sharp with irritation and pain. It was one of the few topics that could shake her composure.

It was hard to reconcile the tales of my father's prominence with the financially cramped circumstances of my childhood—and with my relatives' odd reticence about him. As I got older I tried to learn about him on my own. My main source of information was a notebook filled with newspaper clippings that Paul compiled soon after my father's death. The

articles, some by my father but mostly written by others, dated from the late 1950s and early 1960s. "Credit Reform Fanfare and Flop," "Contract Buyers at Mercy of Sharpies," "Federal Curbs Urged on Wage Assignments"—as a child of eleven, twelve, or thirteen, I could not follow the arguments these articles contained.<sup>2</sup> I gave up in frustration. By the time I got to college I told friends that my father had been some sort of "civil rights attorney," but that was the extent of my understanding of his work.

Given the mysteries of my family's past, perhaps it is no surprise that I became a historian. But it was not until some thirty years after my father's death that I decided to find out more about him. I wanted to understand the source of his public prominence—and discover, as well, the reasons my relatives steadfastly refused to laud him for his activism. I could not ask my mother—she had died in 1983. But my brother Paul again came to the rescue. It turned out that he had compiled not one but close to a dozen large notebooks full of newspaper articles, letters, speeches, and other documents pertaining to my father's career. I read through them systematically. Then I started calling people who had known my father—reporters, friends, fellow activists, clients, and legal partners. They weren't hard to find—many were still listed in the Chicago phone book. Most remembered him instantly, as if his death had occurred a week rather than over three decades earlier. Each person I called gave me contact information for several others. Then I retrieved my father's legal files. I scoured archives and manuscript collections, examining the papers of civic organizations he'd belonged to and those he'd opposed. Slowly, the picture came clear.

The first thing I learned was that my father had represented scores of African Americans who had been grossly overcharged for the houses they had bought. For him, it all began in April 1957, when a black couple, Albert and Sallie Bolton, showed up at his office. They were being evicted from their home and they wanted him to delay the proceedings. My father agreed to look into the matter. He asked what they had paid for their property. When they told him, he was astounded. They had paid the enormous sum of \$13,900 for a cramped, one-hundred-year-old wood-frame house. My father investigated the property records. He discovered that the white real estate agent, Jay Goran, who had sold the cottage to the Boltons in the fall of 1955, had himself purchased the building only the week before—

Clearly my father's clients had been given a raw deal. But the scam went deeper than that. Goran never told the Bolttons that he was the building's owner. He convinced them to make their down payment and to sign some complicated documents that stipulated that the building would remain the legal property of its current owner until they had entirely paid off the property's cost, plus 6 percent interest, through high monthly installments. The contract they signed left the Bolttons in a horribly vulnerable position.

In Chicago, as across the nation, most banks and savings and loans refused to make mortgage loans to African Americans, in part because of the policies of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which "redlined"—that is, refused to insure mortgages—in neighborhoods that contained more than a smattering of black residents.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the Bolttons could not do what most whites would have done—obtain a mortgage loan and use it to pay for their property in full. Their only option was to buy "on contract," that is, more or less on the installment plan. Under the terms of most installment land contracts, the seller could repossess the house as easily as a used car salesman repossessed a delinquent automobile. With even one missed payment, a contract seller had the right to evict the "homeowner" and resell the building to another customer. If the contract seller happened to be a speculator who charged a wildly inflated price for the building, then a missed payment—and subsequent quick eviction and resale for profit—was practically guaranteed.

This is what had happened to the Bolttons. After a year of prompt payments, they had missed one installment and were now threatened with the loss of their entire investment—the down payment, plus all that they'd paid in monthly contract payments and for repairs, insurance, interest, and maintenance. And they were not the only ones. My father found that the speculator who sold the Bolttons their home had recently filed repossession claims on over twenty properties. Another speculator working nearby had filed for sixty-nine repossessions in 1956 and an additional fifty-nine repossessions in the first half of 1957. And these were only two of at least a dozen major operators pursuing similar activities.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1950s, contract selling was common in many American cities where black populations had skyrocketed as a result of post-World War II migration from the South. In Chicago, my father estimated that 85 percent of the properties purchased by blacks were sold on contract. It

calculated that by selling buildings to housing-starved African Americans on such exploitative terms, speculators were robbing Chicago's black population of one million dollars a day.<sup>5</sup> These sales stripped black migrants of their savings during the very years when whites of similar class background were getting an immense economic boost through FHA-backed mortgages that enabled them to purchase new homes for little money down.

The speculators' profits were stunning. As one contract seller bragged, "If anybody who is well established in this business in Chicago doesn't earn \$100,000 a year, he is loafing."<sup>6</sup> My father saw it differently: these profits were the product of machinations that deserved to be labeled criminal. Contract sellers do not in fact "sell the home to a Negro," he told a journalist. They "use the home as a 'bait' to defraud the Negro out of a substantial sum of money and then push the Negro out into the street [in order to] defraud another party."<sup>7</sup>

While contract sellers became millionaires, their harsh terms and inflated prices destroyed whole communities. Because black contract buyers knew how easily they could lose their homes, they struggled to make their inflated monthly payments. Husbands and wives both worked double shifts. They neglected basic maintenance. They subdivided their apartments, crammed in extra tenants, and, when possible, charged their tenants hefty rents. Indeed, the genius of this system was that it forced black contract buyers to be their own exploiters. As my father explained, the black contract buyer was forced to "defraud his own people in order to feed the hungry mouth of the speculator."<sup>8</sup>

The resulting decline of racially changing areas fed white racism. If black contract buyers saw themselves making heroic sacrifices against impossible odds to keep from falling behind on their payments, this was not how their white neighbors viewed the situation. Whites saw population densities doubling, while garbage collection and other municipal services stayed the same or declined. They saw unsupervised children flooding the neighborhood. They noted that buildings bought by African Americans rapidly decayed. Small wonder that whites blamed their black neighbors for the chaos they observed.

Contract selling was another version of a condition that has victimized African Americans from the sharecropping era to our current sub-



its full implications—fabulous enrichment for speculative contract sellers and their investors, debt peonage or impoverishment for many black contract buyers, and an almost guaranteed decay of the communities in which such sales were concentrated—have never been explored.<sup>10</sup> Instead, conventional wisdom on why so many aging urban neighborhoods deteriorated once their populations shifted from white to black has been blind to the issue of speculators and their profits. In the 1950s and 1960s, mainstream thinking was divided between those who blamed blacks for their pathological behavior in destroying their own residences and those who blamed racist whites for hysterically fleeing long-established neighborhoods at the first sight of a black face. By the 1980s and 1990s, the division had shifted only slightly, to one between those who blamed the devastation of urban black neighborhoods on the “culture of poverty,” or the degraded culture of inner-city blacks, and those who argued that such conditions were the product of “deindustrialization,” or the flight of industrial jobs overseas. Up to the present, even commentators who are sympathetic to the plight of inner-city residents frequently blame “the riots” for the eerie emptiness they observe there—seemingly unaware that they are fostering yet another variation of the “blacks destroy their own communities” theme. At best, all of these interpretations point to a lack—of culture, of jobs, of resources, or of courage to fight one’s racist impulses and stay put in a racially mixed area.

My father’s papers suggested an entirely different reading. The reason for the decline of so many black urban neighborhoods into slums was not the absence of resources but rather the *riches* that could be drawn from the seemingly poor vein of aged and decrepit housing and hard-pressed but hardworking and ambitious African Americans. The real threat to “changing” urban neighborhoods was a sobering economic truth: a single investment by a speculating contract seller of \$1,000 could turn into \$3,000 in one year; that investment could be multiplied by thousands across the city; and its profits could be shared widely, as the contract paper that enforced draconian monthly payments was frequently sold off at a discount to middle-class and professional residents of the city.<sup>11</sup> The problem was not that racially changing neighborhoods were unprofitable. On the contrary, the problem was that the pickings were too easy, and the scale of profits too tempting, for many of the city’s prominent citizens—

Although the devastating effects of speculative contract selling have been erased from popular memory, I discovered that in Chicago they were discussed, for a time at least. The source of much of the discussion was my father. His immersion in the heartbreaking details of his clients' lives led him to embark on an impassioned public crusade against Chicago's real estate speculators and the white professionals, mortgage bankers, and politicians who enabled them to thrive. He gave speeches, wrote essays, and made radio addresses and television appearances. He believed that if white Chicagoans could only understand the financial processes at work, they would accept black neighbors.

More significantly, he was convinced that the decay of Chicago's neighborhoods could be stopped. "I claim that Chicagoans will not object to Negro neighbors. I claim that Negroes are welcome in every community in Chicago *if they come in without a corresponding instant deterioration of the home they occupy and the block they occupy*. This deterioration will be guaranteed to accompany Negro arrival . . . so long as we do not pull the fangs from the evil speculators who prey upon Negroes only," he charged.<sup>12</sup> He also warned working-class black Chicagoans about the dangers they faced from housing speculation and other credit-abuse schemes. He pursued this latter course through a biweekly column he wrote for the famed black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* titled "All That Money Can Buy"; a weekly column in a West Side community organization newsletter titled "So You're Buying a Home"; and a weekly broadcast on a black radio program titled *The Cost of Your Dollar*.<sup>13</sup>

He offered solutions as well. My father called upon the Illinois Department of Registration to "revoke the license of any broker who engages in the consistent practice of speculation." He lobbied officials to revise Federal Housing Administration practices so that "minority people will profit from the same program of government insurance as is available" to white Americans. He called upon bankers to set up a fund of "at least 50 million dollars for the sole purpose of lending money to Negro people in competition with the contract dealers." This would "result in an immediate return to the Negro community of the fantastic sums now being drained" by the speculators.<sup>14</sup>

It would have been easy to use my father's papers simply to detail the ugly story of how Northern white mortgage, legal, and real estate pro-

very different story from the culturally-deficient-Southern-rural-blacks-moved-North-and-couldn't-make-it narrative that continues to inform both scholarly and popular literature.<sup>15</sup> But as much as that information needed to be revealed, it didn't fully address the complexity of the situation. As I gradually learned from my father's papers—and from the sometimes wrenching private interviews with which I supplemented them—speculators' exploitation of mid-twentieth-century black Chicagoans' desperate need for housing unleashed two separate processes. The first was a widely discussed though poorly understood public event—the rapid racial turnover of Chicago neighborhoods, usually followed by devastating economic decline. The second was the more private experience of people, both black and white, who inhabited those neighborhoods and who found themselves fighting to hang on to the homes on which they had gambled their futures. This latter, bitter tale was one my father's personal tragedy left me uniquely situated to explore.

Because there were terrible ironies in my father's life—ironies that were most brutally exemplified by the fate of his buildings. At the same time as he was waging his crusade against speculators and contract sellers, he was also managing his own properties, which consisted of four West Side apartment buildings that he had purchased in the 1940s and 1950s. As my father urged others to protect their investments, his own deteriorated. Determined to avoid becoming the sort of slum landlord he denounced, he poured every cent he earned into the buildings, to no avail. Tenants refused to pay their rents. The buildings were repeatedly vandalized. Our family began to suffer financially and my mother offered to find work to help pay the bills, an offer that enraged my father and caused fights between the two of them.

As the bills and the pressures mounted, the end result, as my brother David later told me, was that my father was “caught in his own trap.” All of his buildings were in Lawndale, an area that had been heavily Jewish (my father was born and raised there) but that was rapidly becoming black. When he rented to black tenants, he was called a “blockbuster.” If he were to refuse to rent to them, he would be a racist. Given his public posture, my father could not sell his buildings as blacks were beginning to move in; to do so would make him a hypocrite. If he sold after the neighborhood had become all black, he'd find no buyers except the speculators he was

denouncing. Of course he would not participate in the plunder engaged in by these men and women. He would hold on, then, and try to maintain his properties while the surrounding area crumbled. But if his efforts to maintain them failed, then he was a slumlord. If the buildings were damaged by tenants, he was a slumlord as well.

During the last year of his life my father lived in almost unbearable tension. The buildings were a relentless financial drain. He had plenty of clients, but they were so broke that they couldn't meet their contract payments, much less pay their attorney. He had a certain degree of fame, but he had also incurred the enmity of lawyers throughout the city who could not forgive him for turning against "brother attorneys." He desperately sought to bring in more money, but nothing worked: applications to teach law school, efforts to obtain political jobs, even attempts to get his essays published in national outlets were all met with rejection. His health was failing. In March of his final year, as my father lay in the hospital recuperating from a pulmonary embolism, he was tormented by the possibility that his attempt to live by a code of even minimally fair dealing would result in his leaving his wife and five children destitute.

My brother David told me that toward the end of my father's life he reconsidered his radical politics. But did he? If he had, it would help make sense of a troubling piece of family history. In July 1966, just one year after our father's death, David published an article titled "West Side Story" in the *New Republic*. It was an analysis of conditions in my father's old neighborhood of Lawndale. David was then a precocious eighteen-year-old sophomore at the University of Chicago. Our family was proud that my brother, so fresh from the trauma of his father's death, had published an essay in such a major journal. Yet when I read the article as an adult, its content surprised me. Instead of an analysis of the evils of real estate speculation, it appeared to be a defense of slum landlords. "There's really no such thing as a slum landlord—only slum tenants," David quoted a realtor. "Lawndale real estate . . . is unprofitable," David concluded. "How else can one explain the abandoned buildings all over Lawndale, or the fact that it is impossible to borrow money for a first mortgage on the West Side?"<sup>16</sup>

David's "West Side Story" seemed to invert every argument my father made in his public life. Yet that wasn't my brother's view. "I wrote the

article to defend our father," he told me. In fact, after it was published some of David's fellow students at the University of Chicago had sneered to his face, "Your father was a slumlord."

Who had started these rumors? Were they spread by the "enemies—big and comfortable ones," that my father's *Daily News* obituary had described? Or was there more to it than that? I wondered, because of what I'd learned about Irving Block, the attorney who had helped to settle my father's estate. About six weeks before his death, my father had written to his sister Helen, "I would suggest for help regarding any aspect of the building you call IRVING BLOCK. . . . I have a deep affection for him and trust him to advise you with utmost fidelity."<sup>17</sup> Of all the attorneys my father knew well, and there were surely scores of such men, why had he chosen Irving Block to look after his family? It was an odd choice, given that Block had been well known in Chicago circles for his impassioned defense of contract sellers and slumlords, the very people my father considered the scourge of the city. I learned about this side of Block when I found an old booklet among my father's papers, a reprint of a 1960 Illinois appellate court decision. The case at hand was an egregious but not atypical contract sale. A real estate agent had sold a house to a black couple on contract for \$11,900—after having purchased it himself, shortly before, for \$3,000. Although my father's complaint alleged numerous fraudulent acts committed in the course of the sale, he lost the case. The speculator got off, in part, because of the vigorous defense launched by his attorney, who not only dismissed count after count as "scandalous, impertinent, and not germane to the issues in the case" but also asked the bar to censure my father for his "cold blooded character assassination . . . against . . . brother lawyers." That attorney was Irving Block.<sup>18</sup>

My father's unexpected reliance on Block was an indication that within the tangle of forces and personalities that created slums the sides were not always clear-cut. Not all slum landlords, for example, were exploiters. Speculators were indeed reaping massive profits and destroying sections of Chicago's West and South sides—the two parts of the city where African Americans were purchasing homes on contract—but there were also some owners who were ruined financially by their properties. Mark J. Satter was hardly the only Chicago landlord to find himself dragged down by his real estate investments. An experience recounted by Nicholas von Hoffman,

the right-hand man of famed community organizer Saul Alinsky, made this chillingly clear. As he worked to organize a South Side neighborhood in 1962, von Hoffman realized that pressure on landlords was not going to stop the decay of area housing. At one important meeting, a reviled slumlord turned up with his lawyer, who announced: "I'm the attorney, and here is the deed of conveyance, and you tell us who to fill it out to and the building is yours." As everyone cheered, von Hoffman found himself thinking: "Oh, this is *not* a good sign; these guys know something I haven't figured out yet. . . . I said, 'Saul, there aren't any more slumlords, there are just people stuck with turkeys.'"<sup>19</sup>

But of course there were still slumlords. Major contract sellers loved telling the media that their properties' state of disrepair had been caused solely by their tenants' behavior. They frequently denied their immense profits, which averaged in the 75 percent range, claiming instead that owning buildings in minority communities was simply not profitable. Indeed, the tragic experiences of small landlords were used as a smoke-screen behind which these more sinister forces could hide. Chicago's racially changing and all-black neighborhoods contained both: slumlords who milked their properties and landlords who struggled to maintain them, willfully destructive tenants and also tenants whose sincerest efforts at decent living were thwarted by their landlords' criminal neglect. Yet many made no distinctions, thereby obscuring the underhanded behavior of exploitative contract sellers who owned hundreds of properties by identifying them with the elderly widow who could no longer pay the bills on her building—or with the man like my father who got in over his head by owning more than one property in a redlined neighborhood. Such commentators used a small truth about individuals to cover up a much larger and more significant truth about federal mortgage insurance programs that excluded black buyers, about the lawyers and real estate brokers who found ways to manipulate them, and about the black home buyers who were their victims. The fates of all of these players, landlords and slumlords, decent tenants and criminally destructive ones, were intertwined—sometimes grotesquely so.

Another handy smokescreen concealing the injustice at work was religion and ethnicity. The whites who used violence to keep pioneering black families out of their communities were often Catholic. A significant

contract sales, renegotiate their existing contracts, and open new lines of credit to black home buyers. They picketed realtors and banks. They drew national media attention to the role that the FHA played in the creation of ghettos. Their efforts led to the filing of two massive federal suits aimed at abolishing the nation's dual housing market and ensuring that in the future "a dollar in the hands of a black man" would have the same purchasing power as "a dollar in the hands of a white man."<sup>21</sup> In the mid-1970s, Chicago activists drew upon the CBL's groundwork to create some of the most critically important pieces of urban-focused federal legislation passed in the twentieth century—legislation that led to the investment of billions of dollars in scores of U.S. cities and provided some of the few tools we have for documenting the racial biases and destructive impact of the contemporary subprime mortgage crisis.

Back in the winter of 2000, though, I was just starting to investigate the nagging questions I had about my father's life. I thought I would begin with the buildings, my father's four rental properties in Lawndale. I wanted to know how he had purchased them, why he could not maintain them, and why and to whom they were sold upon his death. These were the concerns on my mind when my brother Paul and I visited our aunt Theresa that winter day. I trusted Theresa. She was liberal; she was tolerant. She had worked most of her life as a teacher in some of the city's toughest schools and then retired to a condominium in one of the Chicago area's few racially integrated neighborhoods. But when I asked her a simple question about the fate of my father's buildings after he died, Theresa turned red with anger. For the first time in my life I heard her raise her voice. "You want to know what happened to the buildings? I'll tell you what happened. Mark should have gotten rid of them long ago. He kept them and they dragged him down, they killed him! People were animals out there, animals! I can tell you, I saw with my own eyes. They chopped down the porches for firewood! They ripped out the toilets and took them with them when they were evicted! But Mark wouldn't sell!" Paul cut in, now highly agitated himself. "How could he sell? He couldn't sell! It was impossible to sell!" Theresa fired back: "He *could* sell. Anyone could sell! You just couldn't be picky about who you sold to. And you better not expect to make a penny!"

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My aunt's outburst was typical of the emotion-charged response I would hear from many Jews who had once lived in Lawndale. It was the bitter residue of a larger history—one that encompassed the mass population shifts of Southern blacks, second-generation immigrant Jews, and urban Catholics; moneymaking schemes, urban renewal, and turnabouts in federal policies; Martin Luther King Jr.'s Chicago campaign, street riots, arson for profit, and arson born of despair. One could start this story in many different places, but I will start with the community of Lawndale. By the mid-1960s, Lawndale would become a national symbol of black ghetto violence and desolation. But in the 1920s, it was still Jewish Lawndale—a teeming immigrant neighborhood that bred radicals and hustlers in equal measure.