

Book Excerpt

Coaching Che Guevara is a genre-bending book, a memoir and a mystery. The story leaps back and forth through time, traveling from a hike through the Andes to the philosophy of the Kabbalah and into the quandary of quantum physics. Along the way, you will meet Eva Perón, Mussolini, Che Guevara, Borges, Kafka, Proust, and a host of Alejandro Fogel's relatives.

Coaching Che Guevara invites you to take an unconventional trip with expeditionary artist Alejandro Fogel as author and tour guide, leading you through a hall of mirrors where the magically real and the ultra-rational collide.

This is not a work of fiction.
Some names and dates have been changed to protect the
privacy of those involved.

My name is Alejandro Mario Fogel.

You would think that Alejandro is a Spanish name and Mario is Italian. But I was named after my two grandfathers: Avrum and Meir, a tailor and a butcher from Eastern Europe. They grew up in the Pale of Settlement, a large area that included present day Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine, Romania and Moldova.

The Pale was created by Catherine the Great at the end of the 18th century. This was the region where Jews were allowed to live. With over five million Jews, the Pale was the largest ghetto in history. Avrum and Meir both lived there, but they never met.

Two of their children found each other many years later on the other side of the world.

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In 1905, Avrum, my grandfather

on my mother's side, left the Pale to escape the Russian draft. He and his wife Sofia arrived in Buenos Aires at the Hotel de los Inmigrantes with a samovar, a metal bed, a wall clock, and their language, Yiddish. They had five children and grew old in this city full of immigrants.

My grandfather on my father's side, Meir, decided instead to stay in the Pale. While Avrum's family was secular, Meir and his family were Hassidic. He didn't want to leave for fear that his children would stop practicing Judaism in a foreign land. On May 23, 1944, Meir and his wife Blime along with eight of their thirteen children were locked in a packed cattle car and sent to Auschwitz.



Alejandro Fogel, "Trains at Viseul de Sus", detail, series of 22 prints, Office Depot Laser Print Paper, non-acid-free, 24 lb, 8 1/8 by 6 1/8 in. Edition: 5 each

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In July of 1953,

In July of 1953, Moishe was in a train going to Argentina from La Paz, Bolivia.

In another train that week, Ernesto Guevara arrived in La Paz from Argentina.

The immigrant from Eastern Europe on his way to a new life in Argentina and the immigrant from Argentina on his way to a new life in Cuba.

The young man carrying his knowledge of Torah and Jewish mysticism, exhausted from persecution, war and poverty. The young man who had just become a physician, going to war to end persecution and poverty.

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In June of 1952

protests against the tyrannical government of General Juan Perón erupted on the streets of Buenos Aires. Ernesto Guevara and Jorge Luis Borges were among the many rioting against Perón's Mussolini-inspired fascist policies. Ernesto Guevara, on his way to becoming a Marxist revolutionary, was back from the 5,000 miles long motorcycle trip that opened his eyes to the misery in Latin America. Jorge Luis Borges, a conservative anti-Marxist, had just published his major book of essays, *Other Inquisitions*. Ernesto and Jorge Luis never met. Their worlds were far apart and growing farther apart every moment. But for a brief time in history, they shared the same political view: they were against Peronism.

Decades later, just before Borges died, I followed him through the streets of Buenos Aires.

Half a century later, long after Che died, I coached him at the United Nations in New York City.

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On the evening of October 10, 1967

when I got home from Hebrew school, I saw Che Guevara's picture on the front page of the newspaper. He had just been killed by the military in Bolivia.

I asked my parents about him. "A Communist," my mother told me. Six years later, as I was jumping out a window, escaping a bomb explosion at my university, Che Guevara entered my life.

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ANUNCIAN EN BOLIVIA QUE MURIO EL "CHE" GUEVARA

SEGUNDA EDICION • 88 PAGINAS

Clarín

20 Pesos

Año XXIII Diario de la Mañana N° 1844

Buenos Aires, Martes 10 de Octubre de 1967

El General Zenteno Anaya informó que el Dirigente Cubano Cayó en un Encuentro Librado con Tropas del Ejército * Se Espera Ahora un Anuncio Oficial del Gobierno



L A PAZ, 9 (Reuter, AFP y AP). — El famoso guerrillero argentino Ernesto "Che" Guevara, compañero de armas de Fidel Castro, cuya presencia en Bolivia, luego de su imprevista desaparición del escenario político de Cuba, fue repetidamente señalada por el gobierno boliviano, habría sido muerto en un encuentro librado entre fuerzas militares y un grupo guerrillero en la localidad de Las Higueras, cerca de Vallegrande. La noticia, dada a conocer por el general Zenteno Anaya, no ha sido todavía confirmada oficialmente, esperándose la identificación de los guerrilleros muertos. (Información en las páginas DOS y TRES).

ERNESTO "CHE" GUEVARA en una pose característica, cuando ocupaba el cargo de ministro de Industrias en Cuba. Ahora en Bolivia se informó oficialmente que fue muerto cuando integraba un grupo de guerrilleros.

- OTROS HECHOS IMPORTANTES DEL PANORAMA NACIONAL**
- Circulante** El último balance señala un nuevo récord en la circulación mensual. En la página 22.
- Posición** Costa Méndez reafirmó la posición argentina contra el castroismo. Información en la página 18.
- ALALC** Comenzó la reunión para considerar problemas afines al intercambio. Informac. en la página 26.
- Becas** Modificó la Universidad de Buenos Aires el régimen para estudios magisterales. Informac. en la página 31.
- Donativo** Recibió el H. de Niños un coleccionador y un detector de pulso capilar. Inf. en la página 30.
- Centros** Establecieron para la entrega de la libreta sanitaria a los alumnos de 7º grado. Inf. en la pag 28.
- Bolsa** Poca actividad y variaciones en títulos y valores. Hubo 56 boques y 28 otros. Información en la página 42.
- Dólar** Ligeros vaivenes en el área de futuros. Cotización oficial, 350 pesos. Ver información en la página 44.
- Tornado** Casó cuarenta y cinco el que azotó una extensa zona de Rio Cuarto. Informac. en la página 35.
- Mendoza** Récord absoluto de la industria vitivinícola: más de 18 millones de hectólitros. En la página 35.
- Chaco** Renunció el intendente de Resistencia, teniente coronel Raúl César Falduto. Informac. en la página 37.
- Comisión** Delinea la de cooperación económica argentina-española. Información en página 22.
- Atletismo** Se inició a las 15.20 la 2ª jornada del Sudamericano. Informac. en la página 42.

INTERVIENEN EL PODER JUDICIAL DE FORMOSA



Así lo Anunció Borda * Ayer, el Gabinete Escuchó Informes de Costa Méndez y K. Vasena y Analizó la Racionalización

CAMINOS
Se Licitaron Obras Viales por Valor de 1.596.789.141 Pesos

PROMOCION
Se Alentará el Consumo de Carne Ovina en Capital y Gran Bs. Aires

EDITORIAL
La Secretaría de la OEA
La próxima renovación de la Secretaría General de la Organización de Estados Americanos abre la posibilidad de una gestión que llene el importante vacío de un candidato argentino, sobre todo si se tienen en cuenta las dificultades que plantea la elección de una figura aceptable para todos los países. (Páginas 17)

- España** Eligen Hoy Diputados Por Sufragio Directo (INFORMACION EN LA PAGINA OCHO)
- Argel** Comienza la Reunión de Países en Desarrollo (INFORMACION EN LA PAGINA CINCO)
- Uruguay** Grave Crisis * Impuso Gestido Medidas de Seguridad * Renunciaron Cuatro Ministros (INFORMACION EN LA PAGINA SEIS)

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Clarín newspaper cover, October 10, 1967



The author's parents Esther and Moishe

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“Papá is dead”

my sister Ceci tells me on the telephone. My legs weaken. I have to sit down. She is crying, and I can barely speak. I'm holding the telephone and staring out the window. The

Metropolitan Life building, illuminated in white and blue, is shining in the distance. “What happened?” was all I could think to say. As she tells me that his kidneys finally gave out, I feel my body growing cold and the entire living room, a tiny speck of real estate dust in Midtown Manhattan, gets dark and blurry. My dad’s smile is fading. His olive skin is pale.

I finally say to my sister: “We’ll be taking the first plane I can find.” It is late in the evening here in New York City and the middle of the night in Israel. I can’t stop thinking about Moishe lying in a hospital bed, his mouth slightly open, his eyes closed....



Alejandro Fogel, “The Night Moishe Died”, detail, monprint, Iris print on Somerset Velvet rag paper, 8 1/8 by 12 7/8 in.

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The author and his sister Ceci

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I'm going to write a few lines

about my father's funeral. I always thought I wouldn't include these lines in this book, but here they are:

We are in Kibbutz Beit Haemek in Western Galilee. Moishe's coffin is going down into his grave. We are all devastated. Ceci and Shelley, my wife, are crying. I can't cry. The hundred or so people gathered for the ceremony are watching Moishe slowly descend under a blistering sun. My Hassidic cousins, whom I never met before, are dressed in shiny black mourning suits, their black hats melting on their scalps, and their long, wild beards wet with sweat. They surround the grave, making sure everything has been done properly according to their religious protocols.

I hear a bird singing.... After a few seconds I realize that it isn't a bird, it's a cell phone ringtone. One of my Hassidic cousins quickly puts his right hand inside the pocket of his black silky vest and takes out his black phone. He looks at the Caller ID and picks up. "Alo?" he says, and goes on in a lengthy conversation that I can't understand. He withdraws a few feet from the grave as the coffin slowly goes down and finishes his chat.

I look at Shelley and Ceci, who are staring at the scene in disbelief, and say: "It must be God calling, otherwise he wouldn't answer."

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I just arrived in Sacel

a small town in northern Transylvania, today part of Romania. I was so excited to come here, the mythical Sacel where my father was born. I've been talking about Sacel since I was a child. I would never refer to it by its name but as "the town where my Dad was born". It was always so far away, so remote. Unreachable. I've been longing for this moment for years.

I'd been to Romania a few years ago, to Bucharest, the capital. At that time, my friend Alexandru and I were going to drive out to Sacel, which lies at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. But we had to cancel because the mountain roads were buried in snow. Romania then felt like a deep dark nightmare. The ghosts of the victims of Ceaucescu's dictatorship were walking around trying to get their stories heard. We lived in Bucharest at Strada Eminescu 252, apartment 17 for a week, and I listened to one of those ghosts.

But here I am today, walking the streets of Sacel with Shelley. We are a family and we are not Hassidic, an unimaginable thought for my grandfather Zvi Meir. He expected generations of Fogels to follow the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hassidism, as the family had done for over two centuries.

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov, was born in Poland in 1698. He gained a reputation as a miracle healer. He taught my family that one must worship God in everything, not just by traditional religious observances, but in daily life. His reputation as a miracle healer gained him a large circle of followers among ordinary people and scholars alike.

The Baal Shem Tov was a Kabbalist. I've been trying to understand the concept of Kabbalah for many years, always ending with a feeling similar to the one I had about Sacel: remote and unreachable.

It wasn't until I met Jorge Luis Borges that I understood the connection between me, my family and the Kabbalah.

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Jorge Luis Borges lived with his wife

María Kodama in an apartment in Buenos Aires at the corner of Calle French and Calle Bustamante, right across the street from my painting studio. The first time I saw them I was having breakfast at Café Literario, next door to their building. I was shocked to see The Master enter the room and take a table next to mine. They had coffee and *medialunas*. They were a stunning couple. He was in his eighties, blind and tall. She was in her early forties, half Argentinean and half Japanese. It seemed that everything grew quiet as they entered.

Over a period of several weeks I followed Borges on his wanderings through the streets of Buenos Aires without him knowing it. At first I had no idea what I was doing. Was it a travel-performance piece, like when I walked the Incas Road in the Andes mountains? At that time, me hiking the Road was the piece. Now, Borges was the main focus and the road, the streets of Buenos Aires, was the background landscape. The first time I followed Borges, he walked for about an hour holding María Kodama's arm and then went into a bookstore. After a few minutes they stopped at one of the display tables. María Kodama picked up a book and started reading to Borges in a low voice. The book was about the Kabbalah.

When they left the bookstore I followed for a few minutes and then stopped him.

“Maestro, I'm so glad I've run into you. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” he responded. His eyes were focused somewhere high on the horizon. María Kodama was staring directly at me.

“My ancestors are Hassidic. I'm very curious about them and the Kabbalah. I'm thinking about determinism and I want to know...”

He interrupted me and said: “La Cábala es el libro que viene detras del Libro.” “The Kabbalah is the book behind the Book. The Torah is “The Text,” the literal word of God, which is the origin of all things. Kabbalah is the word of man attempting to comment upon and interpret Torah, while being faithful to it. Words have real volume in the Kabbalah. They are heavy and three-dimensional, numbered and measured, as if the words were actual beings and objects, themselves.

He thought for a moment, and then said: “Kabbalists believe that God dictates word by word what he wants to say. This means that “The Text” of the Torah is an absolute text in which change is measured as zero. What really attracts me is not the text itself, but the possibility of a text where chance has been ruled out.”

Excerpt



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We were standing in front of the building where my father used to work, the AMIA, the Jewish Aid Society. The building would be blown up by Iranian terrorists several years later. On that day Moishe was only two blocks from the AMIA, on his way to work there. His body lifted off the ground at the same time that some of his friends were blasted apart and buried in the rubble. I spoke to him on the phone a few hours after the explosion that killed 85 people and injured hundreds. He repeated what he had said to me many times over the years: “I am a lucky man. I escaped again.”

The AMIA was the first place Moishe went looking for a job, when he first arrived in Buenos Aires at the Eva Perón train station.

Determinism: (n) All events are causally determined by a chain of prior events.

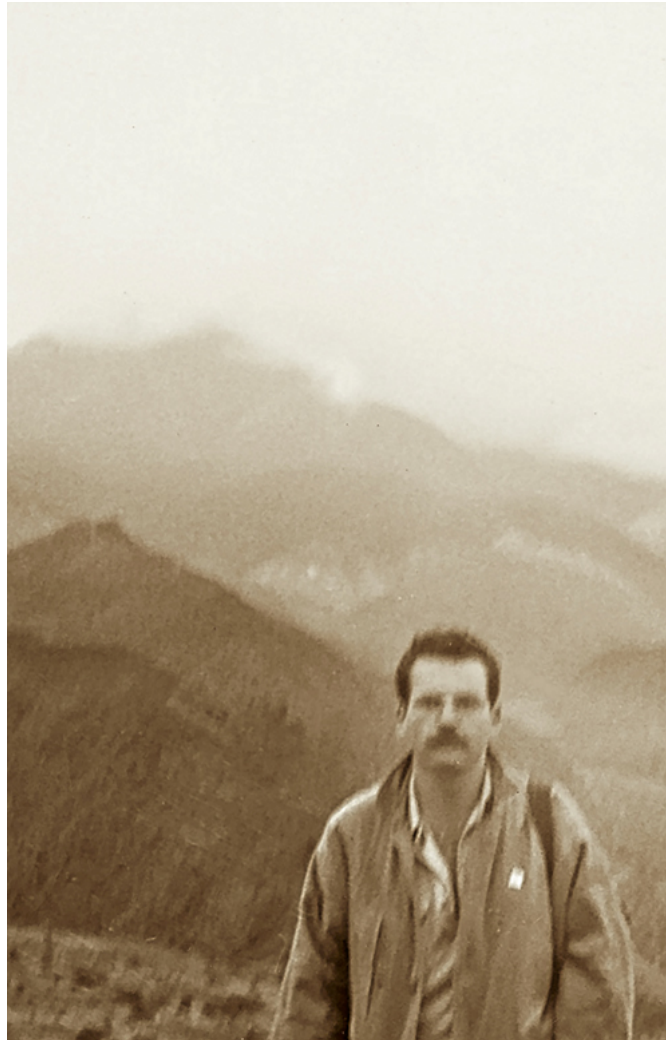
Borges had answered my question without even knowing what it was. Just as he said, “chance has been ruled out.” I was there, standing face to face with Jorge Luis Borges, years before the bomb exploded, years after Moishe knocked on the AMIA’s door for the first time looking for work, so I can write this sentence, at this moment, and you, the reader, will finish reading it in this particular instant.

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The author at Mount Aconcagua in the Andes Mountains

Excerpt



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After I spoke with Borges

I kept wondering if this universe in which we live is not the only one. Maybe there are parallel universes, hidden from our eyes but not hidden to the flow of energy that causes our bodies to function.

Borges is the blind man who could see a parallel universe. A Kabbalist.

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I'm in the Lake Como region

of northern Italy, standing in front of a plaque indicating the place where Benito Mussolini was executed in 1945. I'm staying in this area for the next five weeks at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center as an artist-in-residence. A fellow resident took me on a reconnaissance trip.

Unknowingly, we followed Mussolini's last steps from the city of Como to the town of Menaggio and stumbled upon this spot at Villa Belmonte where he was executed by Italian Partisans. Once we realized that we were trailing Mussolini's road to death, we decided to keep going and follow the body to its next stop: the Piazzale Loretto in Milan where the corpse was hung by his feet from a girder at an Esso gas station for public display.

My colleague is a historian and he's very excited about this unexpected macabre trip. I, on the other hand, am more interested in Leonardo's *The Last Supper* at the Santa Maria delle Grazie church, our agreed-upon next stop in Milan.

As we drive to Milan, one of Mussolini's most fervid students, the Argentinean general Juan Perón comes to mind. In 1945, just a few months after Mussolini's execution, Juan Perón became President of Argentina and picked up the torch of his beloved teacher.

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I tried to see *The Last Supper*, fighting off tourists and trying to see through the bars of the restoration scaffold, but it was futile. I gave up and bought a poster of the painting instead.

Stopping to recover at a café down the street, we stand at the counter and order cappuccinos. As we wait, I'm looking at the many brands of liquors and wines on the shelves behind the bar. I can't believe my eyes when I see an extensive collection of wine bottles, all with the face of Mussolini on them. I ask the barista about the wine. He tells me that it's really good and that they also have this other one. He points to the shelf above it and, to my horror, I see several wine bottles with the picture of Hitler on them.

The official story after Mussolini's government fell is that the fascists were removed from power and Italy became a democracy. In reality, more than 40,000 fascists who committed horrific crimes during the war were given amnesty and went free. The amnesty didn't include the top leaders, but very few of those in the highest political and military ranks were indicted. In 1973, ninety-five percent of senior civil servants from Mussolini's government were still in their jobs.

Perón's own fascist dictatorship was overthrown by another fascist regime in 1955: the *Revolución Libertadora* or "Liberating Revolution" led by the Argentinean military. All of Perón's followers were purged from government. Even Perón's name was banned and replaced in official documents and the press with the euphemism "the deposed tyrant". People would refer to him for many years as *El Hombre* or *El Macho*. In 1973, Perón came out of exile in Spain and returned to Argentina. He was elected President for the third time. His government didn't last long. He died a few months after taking office. He had made his third wife, Isabelita (an ex-burlesque dancer), Vice President and after he died, she took over with the help of her astrologist. Her disastrous rule was also brief, because a Military Junta took over once again. They inaugurated the darkest period in Argentinean history: the Dirty War, in which 30,000 civilians disappeared. Among them was my friend Darío Bedne.

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Alejandro Fogel, "Il Vino del Camerata", monoprint of an online image, Office Depot Laser Print Paper non-acid-free, 24 lb, 8 1/2 by 6 1/8 in

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I'm in Rome now

sitting on the steps of the Garibaldi Bridge. Moishe sat here once, too, one of the millions of people displaced by World War II. As I follow his steps, every time I see what he saw, stand where he stood, or sit where he sat, I learn a bit more about him. Since the time he left Sacel in 1941, he navigated his way in the world following one single clue: Jewish ethnicity. He believed that it was the only protection he had. The only way to survive was by finding others who spoke Yiddish. This end of the Garibaldi Bridge overlooks the Jewish part of town. Rome's Jews originally settled on the other side, in Trastevere, but by the 13th century they had started to move across the river. Via del Portico d'Ottavia, with its labyrinth of Roman, Medieval and Renaissance architecture, used to mark the Jewish ghetto's boundary. Today, it is the center of Jewish life, and it's a good place to sample Rome's Jewish cuisine. In fact, as I sit at the very end of the bridge, I'm eating some delicious deep fried artichokes, a Roman specialty, I got at a restaurant called Ba'Ghetto.

There are many people around me having their lunch on the bridge's promenade that runs parallel to the Tiber River. Most of them are Albanian refugees. I think about Moishe sitting here as a refugee, doing exactly the same thing most of these people are doing: waiting for help.

The word *ghetto* is Italian and was used for the first time in Venice, around the year 1516, to describe a neighborhood in which Jews were confined to prevent them from mixing with the Christian population. They were forced to wear star-shaped yellow badges and yellow berets. The Albanians of the Garibaldi Bridge wear mostly jeans and t-shirts. Their chests advertise Hard Rock cafés, The GAP and Che Guevara.

The word "ghetto" came into popular use again in the mid-1930s when the Nazi came to power. This time it described a holding area for Jews who would be transported to the concentration camps. My grandparents and most of Moishe's siblings were taken to the Viseul de Sus ghetto in northern Romania before they were sent to Auschwitz.

I want to ask the Albanians some questions but none of them speak English. Anyhow, the answers are on their faces: exhaustion, loss of identity, fear. They are part of the 20 million refugees around the world. Twenty million people now like Moishe was then: homeless, displaced, on the move, following cosmic clues that will take them to their new realities. When I think about Moishe moving around Europe in the years after the war, I see him sitting on the roof of a train, closing his eyes to the wind, hoping that the next stop will be the end of the road. It took him seven years to find it.

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We are having coffee

at Harvey Keitel's loft in Tribeca. We stayed on long after the party ended. Shelley and Harvey are discussing the *Book of Job* and thinking about collaborating on a one-man show about it. Shelley is specifically referring to Carl Jung's book *Answer to Job*. Jung saw the Holy Trinity as having a missing fourth part: Evil. For Jung, the Trinity is really a Quaternity, and Job is innocent.

I asked myself, assuming that God exists: can God be evil? One of those questions with no answer. We humans are so far from understanding the nature of the cosmos that very complex questions like this are absurd and pointless.

Harvey and I were disappointed that our families weren't from the same part of the Pale. His mom came from the South East of Romania and my Dad from the North West. No connection there.

But something remarkable happened at the party earlier that evening. I met a movie producer. Somehow we ended up talking about Che Guevara and my visit to La Higuera, where Che was killed in 1967. After a few minutes, she made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

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I'm having an espresso

and talking about Mao Tse-tung with my friend Brian at Café Roma in Little Italy, a rapidly vanishing corner of Manhattan. Long gone are the days when Italian immigrants lived here on Mulberry Street. Hundreds of thousands of them went fleeing poverty and persecution in their homeland and settled in New York at the turn of the 20th century. The wave of refugees was so extraordinary in number that, in some cases, the population of a single Italian village ended up living on the same block of Little Italy or even in the same tenement building.

Little Italy has been gradually taken over by Chinatown and is now barely a couple of blocks lined with Italian restaurants. Chinatown is in full expansion. Its population has grown to about 150,000 residents. Some of them came in the 1960's, refugees from the Cultural Revolution. Mao Tse-tung believed that the old order and everyone in it must be destroyed to create a new one. Two days later I was whispering something similar into Che Guevara's ear.

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