

MAHILATOWN - ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF MINORITY'S PLIGHT

(Note: The following article was written by L. Ling-chi Wang on November 30, 1968, months before the tragic fire at the International Hotel on Sunday, March 16, 1969 that took the lives of three hotel residents.)

196 helpless elderly residents of the International Hotel at 848 Kearny (at Pacific) are now being evicted so that the landlord can demolish the existing low-cost housing structure and build a profit-making multi-level parking lots. They are ordered to vacate the premises by January 1, 1969. The senior residents are almost exclusively Chinese and Filipinos; most of them live on small pensions and 90% of them are veterans of some war or other. The landlord is Mr. Walter Shorenstein, president of Milton Meyer Company - the same company that was interested in developing Fort Mason into an area of luxury housing in spite of the City's crying need for additional educational facilities and low-cost housing. He also heads the powerful Park and Recreation Commission, described recently as "one of the most unapproachable in S.F. government" and "unresponsive to the wishes of the people."

The tragic incident touched off an unexpected series of protests by the traditionally mellow yellow people and is now attracting more public attention than the big realtor can tolerate with composure. Supervisor Jack Morrison joined the protest; however, this author regrets to inform the public that four groups conspicuously missing in the fight for social justice are those so-called Chinatown representatives to the Human Rights and Housing Commissions, the local EOC staff and the Chinatown establishment. More significant, however, are the crucial public issues this unknown hotel generated. In my opinion, the major issues are:

1. Social Justice: a multi-million-dollar corporation summarily decided that parking cars was more profitable than parking 196 poverty-stricken elderly. The fact that such callous displacement of the poor without acceptable relocation and sufficient compensation is "legal" points out clearly the inadequacy of the existing city housing ordinances. For one thing, the economically discriminating ordinances provide the rich with unlimited economic power to exploit and obliterate the poor at will. No protection is afforded the poor. Under existing laws, historical sites or monuments actually receive more protection than the poor. Some measures must be enacted to rectify the existing unjust law and to provide legal protection to tenants.

2. Housing Standard: characteristically, Mr. Shorenstein refused to deal with the critical moral issue at hand and chose rather to explain the eviction by saying that the Hotel was "deteriorated and unlivable." He said, "If there were ever a fire in the building, I would not want to have it on my conscience." First of all, it is the responsibility of the landlord to maintain the building and make it livable. If Mr. Shorenstein is truly concerned about the safety of the old folks, he should have improved or remodelled the entire hotel to begin with. Secondly, I cannot help but wonder whether it is Shorenstein or the Bureau of Building Inspection that has the power to decide the fire safety of the building. According to an Argonaut reporter who deliberately checked with the Bureau, the International Hotel passed inspection in March of this year. Mr. Shorenstein apparently sets, at will, his own standards and measuring stick.. Who is running the city anyway?

3. Racism: Apparently no one except the Milton Meyer Company and Tino Pegino, a barber in the building, knew about the City Hall hearing which

subsequently permitted the company on September 5 to build a parking lot. The poor barber had no chance with those "big people with portfolios and everything." When the notice of eviction was finally issued by the company, it was written in a language "impossible for people to understand," according to Patrick Devaney, housing specialist for the San Francisco Council of Churches. These two examples are typical cases of how the dominant race has customarily taken advantage of a helpless minority. Mr. Shorenstein knows far too well that the Chinese and the Filipinos are in a negligible minority and are politically and economically incapable of waging a battle against his firm. Moreover, reknown oriental fatalism greatly encourages the white society to take full advantage of the unfailingly non-resisting Filipinos and Chinese. Historically, the white society got away with anything it wanted with the yellow minority. There is no reason for Mr. Shorenstein and his company to expect the contrary.

The current struggle between the rich and the poor, between the white majority and the yellow minority will continue. The outcome is difficult to predict. But whatever the outcome may be, it will have immediate effect on the future of Chinatown. What is happening today to Mailatown could very well happen tomorrow to Chinatown.

Meeting with Mr. Sid Wolinsky,
Attorney for the Tenants of the Hotel

Date: Tuesday April 15, 1969

Time: 2 pm.

Place: West Madrone Room, ASUC Building.