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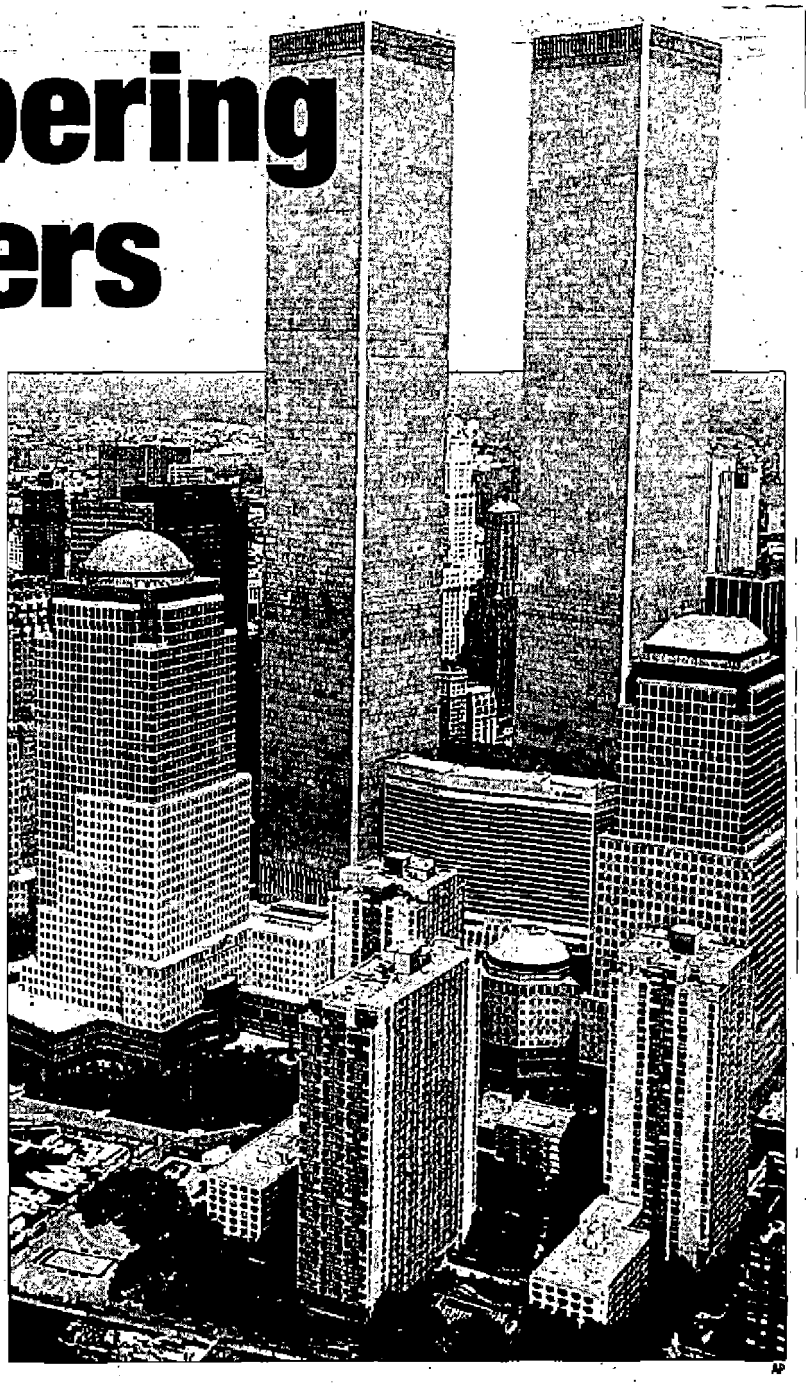
Remembering The Towers



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IRWIN STELZER

AT 8:45 last Tuesday morning, I was sitting in a plane at Kennedy airport waiting to take off when my cell phone rang.

A very worried spouse said that a plane had crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center, and she was checking to be certain that it wasn't mine. Cita also said that given the clear weather, she couldn't believe the hit was an accident.

Right, as usual.

But somehow neither I nor my fellow passengers absorbed the implications of the smoke we could now see billowing from the tower. Our plane taxied onto the tarmac. Then it stopped, and my wife called again to tell me why.

It is amazing how quickly an event of global import gets translated into the personal. One passenger was the CEO of a company with thousands of employees, among them a son-in-law, in the upper floors of the World Trade Center. Others had children working for various Wall Street firms.

I had no such immediate personal connection. Yet I was moved in a personal way. Let me explain.

I was brought up on the Lower East Side of New York. My father came to this country as a 9- or 10-year-old, with an identifying tag tied to his clothes, and no English. This great and open country gave him the chance to prosper — within the meaning of that word at the time — and educate me so that I, too, could prosper, and to an extent that would astonish him.

"Only in America" was an oft-used phrase in our house, sometimes to express exasperation with some aspect of cultural life in this still-slightly-foreign land, more often to marvel at the opportunities it offers.

And by "prosper" I don't mean only money.

Sure, there was discrimination against Jews, but discrimination provides an incentive to overcome it, in part so as to turn the tables on the discriminators when fate and business dealings put us on opposite sides.

Which is why the "Jewish" law and consulting firms that sprang up in New York in the 1950s — when the "white shoe" firms wouldn't even interview top Jewish graduates of premier schools such as Harvard — came to be known as "pushy."

One thing we all knew: New York City was the only place where we could carve out the rich, exciting lives we were enjoying. There were enough businessmen in the market for talent — and never mind whether those pitching for their business had uncles with great family names, or knew a driver from a putter, or wore the right school tie.

And the vitality of the city — its night life, bookies — well, I'll leave all of that to Damon Runyon and Frank Sinatra.

But I must mention its special integrity. Billions of dollars change hands on the stock exchange every day, with no written contracts; from your broker to your bookmaker, in this city you can count on a man's word to be his bond.

Which brings me to the World Trade Center.

EVERYONE joked that it was then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's last erection or, to the more prudish, a white elephant. And so it seemed.

This was a day when a Wall Street address was essential unless you were in one of the lower levels of the financial services industry, like selling insurance. No one would go as far west as the Twin Towers except to play squash in the nearby athletic club (no Jews allowed).

No one, that is, except relatively new firms who couldn't find any space on Wall Street and sensed that the Twin Towers just might be a prestige address some day soon. Besides, it was cheap.

So I took a gamble and signed a lease, feeling just as much a pioneer, moving west of Broadway towards the Hudson River, as earlier American entrepreneurs must have felt moving west of the Mississippi.

Like them, we prospered. And this even though we moved into one of the lower-rise World Trade Center buildings, after our staff protested our original choice of a few floors at the top of one of the towers.

So, to me, New York and the World Trade Center are all mixed up in my head and heart with the realization of the American dream.

I can't forget what it felt like to take possession of shiny new offices in what was to become one of the great office complexes of the greatest city in the world. It was more than a commercial triumph.

It was an accomplishment that let us share in the swagger and sense of invulnerability that all New Yorkers have, especially when confronting outsiders — those not privileged to face the daily trials of getting to and from work in overcrowded subways; to eat in joints where the waiter or waitress greets you with "What'll you have?" instead of "Hello, I am your server"; those who wouldn't know where to get a haircut at midnight after picking up an early edition of a New York tabloid.

POOR souls, those Runyonesque, breakfast-eating Scarsdale Galahads, with their Brooks Brothers suits. And their lawns to mow. They thought New York was a good place to visit, but they wouldn't want to live there — just as well, from the point of view of us New Yorkers.

When Frank Sinatra called New York "the city that never sleeps" he had in mind something quite different from the round-the-clock rescue efforts that at this writing continue. But those efforts wouldn't surprise him. New Yorkers can work as well as play at night.

And one thing we know how to do: survive.

And prevail.

From the Sept. 24 Weekly Standard. Irwin M. Stelzer is a contributing editor to the magazine, director of regulatory studies at the Hudson Institute and a columnist for the Sunday Times (London).

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