Framed on the back wall, next to a gushing Jeff Smith accolade to Sophie’s Polish cooking and pictures of Chicago mayors and Kennedys glad-handing patrons and staff during election campaigns, is a community newspaper article recounting a funeral held a few years ago in the Busy Bee restaurant. Ed Balchowsky, who lost an arm fighting in the Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, was hailed by Busy Bee regulars as Chicago’s Falstaff—a flamboyant, white-bearded artist, pianist, and poet who was struck and killed by an El train at the age of seventy-three.

It’s unsurprising that he should be memorialized here: Chicagoans take an offhand pride in their dumpy corner taverns, storefront ethnic restaurants, ball parks, and other places that root them in their rough and beloved neighborhoods and that define community allegiances. The Tribune’s Mike Royko often sets up his columns on current events as cynical bar-stool conversations with buddies from his old Polish-Ukrainian neighborhood. The Busy Bee on North Damen Avenue is as well known as any neighborhood Chicago institution because of its long history and because at election time politicians flock there to be photographed rubbing shoulders with “da people.” Opened by a Bohemian family around 1913, the Busy Bee is a storefront café now operated by the family of Polish-born Sophie Madej, who this year celebrated her twenty-fifth year of ownership.

Arriving in America after World War II, Sophie raised four kids while working in a Chicago packing house and saving the
money to buy the Busy Bee. The children (all of whom have worked at the restaurant), patrons, and staff say the place is less a restaurant than an extended family. Sophie says, "You see them coming back and back, and then you know they love you, too." She's right: It's not the potato pancakes, pierogi, stuffed cabbage, and baked short ribs that bring them back, but the people and the place. Food is integral to life—but at times food best plays second fiddle to other forms of sociability.

In the community press, the Busy Bee's motto is "Home Cooked Quality & Old World Quantity." A simple red-and-white sign above the entrance identifies the restaurant, and behind the dingy front window, shining modestly in the daylight—the place is open "dawn to dusk"—is a neon bee. The whole transcends its parts: part coffee shop, part neighborhood ethnic restaurant, and part bar (the house specialty is the "Busy Bee-stinger" made with a dash of the Polish honey liqueur called krupnik).

Its shabby exterior—among run-down storefronts on a broken-sidewalk street on which the homeless camp under the El tracks—can give newcomers the notion that the Busy Bee's clientele resides at the nearest Jesus Saves Mission. But the atmosphere of the street belies both the neighborhood's vitality and the role the Busy Bee plays in it. One reason for the restaurant's popularity is its location, at the busy six-way Damen—North—Milwaukee Avenue intersection underneath a train station. The intersection is the central one in the Wicker Park neighborhood of West Town, about three miles northwest of the Loop.

As you ride from O'Hare Airport toward the skyscrapers of downtown Chicago, West Town is the Old World—looking cityscape you see to the south of the Kennedy Expressway, dotted with magnificent patina-domed churches built by German, Scandinavian, and Slavic settlers. The area is steeped in history and politics; its development was a factor in Chicago's recovery and industrial expansion after the 1871 fire destroyed the center of the city. By 1910 West Town was a diverse, high-density, urbanized community. Ethnic Poles, many of them Jews, made up half its population in 1930—then the largest concentration outside of Warsaw—followed by Italians, Russian Jews, and Ukrainians. Fragments of this multiethnic heritage survived in area churches, stores, restaurants, and landmarks as the area declined to 40 percent of its peak population.

Since the 1960s the eastern part of West Town has become heavily populated by Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, while to the west many blacks reside. A third of the residents live below the poverty level. The mostly brick, two- and three-flat houses have aged poorly, affected by a rash of arson fires in the 1970s. Numerous stores in the area are boarded up or have been converted to evangelical churches, though some small dry-goods and cleaning shops remain. Local pharmacies are no longer friendly places with a soda or coffee counter, but sterile, chair-filled prescription dispensaries for Medicaid and Medicare recipients. There is a popular beauty parlor across the street from the Busy Bee. Nearby bars are pitiful things, with most liquor business going to small grocery stores. The vaulted sidewalks—raised six feet early in the century—are crumbling and collapsing.

This grim urban scene is relieved by Wicker Park itself, only a block from the Busy Bee. Once harboring a large swan-filled pond, the park now attracts residents to its basketball and softball facilities and green lawns. In the late nineteenth century, the park drew German meat packers, beer barons, and merchants who built expensive homes, many now in various stages of rehabilitation. On several Busy Bee walls hang framed black-and-white photographs of these fine old houses, an indication of the pride Wicker Park residents have in their community.

Two blocks south on Devon, just past Wicker Park, is a simple ten-story building for publicly-subsidized elderly tenants. This supply of reliable voters explains why, in the last Chicago redistricting, this couple of square blocks that includes the Busy Bee was kept in the 32nd Ward to the north, controlled by powerful Democratic ward committee members and House Ways and Means Committee Chair Dan Rostenkowski. Sticking like a tooth into the heavily Hispanic 26th Ward, it is the most blatant instance of gerrymandering in the city. The residents of this building make up an important part of the Busy Bee's regular clientele.
Outside the Busy Bee, panhandlers do on the streets what aldermen do in backrooms. Tired men with nowhere to go doze on boxes on the sidewalk. Old men in sock caps and overcoats trudge down the streets. Hispanic women navigate baby strollers with difficulty over the broken sidewalks.

Posted on the wall next to the entrance to the Busy Bee are bills of all kinds: political candidates, “Get out of El Salvador” broadsides, announcements of local art exhibits, rock club concerts, and a birthday celebration for the late Nelson Algren, author of the classic Chicago: City on the Make. The posters, impastoed in years of tattered and faded layers, contribute a certain grimness to the Busy Bee, but they also indicate that locals understand this to be a place to reach people. Inside, next to the telephone beside the counter is a bulletin board announcing yard sales, apartments to let, odd jobs, items for sale.

Despite the sharp racial segregation persisting in Chicago neighborhoods and community hangouts, the Busy Bee’s crossroads location in an area of ethnic flux opens it to a diverse clientele of regulars, although Polish and Polish-accented English remains the ruling buzz. The clientele, mostly men, is a heterogeneous lot. Mixed-race young couples in declassé, artsy dress—there is a small art colony in the neighborhood and a flier in an apartment window above the Busy Bee sign recently announced an art benefit for persons with AIDS—blend with ethnic Polish, black, and Hispanic blue-collar workers, business people, elderly pensioners from the nearby senior citizens high-rise, a few parents with children, and on-duty cops.

Throughout the day, a succession of men kibitz across the two counters in the first room, jesting about nothing in particular, or engaging in sophisticated discussions of Soviet politics: “Gorbachev is more popular here than in Russia. Yeltsin is more of a reformer. He wants to loosen central control of the republics.” Some of the older men wear flat European-style wool caps, while many of the younger ones wear army caps. Small-business men, black and white, in coats and ties, talk deals at dining room tables, as others drop by to see who’s there.

A thin, stubble-faced young man sits down at the counter with a copy of the New York Times and complains to an older man drinking his morning coffee with his toast and eggs: “It’s the most biased paper around, worse than any of them. Even the Wall Street Journal is better—at least it tells both sides, and it’s up-front with its business bias. Hell, the Chicago Tribune is almost as bad—so biased to rich people. The Sun Times is better.” “Then why are you reading it?” says the older man. “A good question,” replies the young man, dropping the conversation.

Like the exterior, the two-room interior is also worn, but scrubbed clean to the corners by the hive-like industriousness of the mostly Polish-accented female staff who work the counters, kitchen, and tables under the direction of the gregarious Sophie. The counter room, decidedly the more decrepit of the two, has four booths and about thirty counter seats on three sides of a rectangle in front of the kitchen, all underneath a beige-painted tin ceiling and slow-turning fans. In the center of the counter area is a long formica table holding hard rolls, coffee cakes cut to order, sweet rolls, and baking sheets of thin cobble-like pies with sugar frostings. Waitresses pour a bottomless cup of coffee.

Lottery tickets are sold at the cashier’s counter at the entrance. A side counter in front of the liquor shelves—there is no real stand-up bar here, and the main drinks are coffee and Polish beer—holds community newspapers: the Community Free Press, North/Northwest edition; the bilingual Spanish-English Wicker Park/West Town Extra; and the Worker, published by the Marxist-Leninist Workers Organization of Chicago. On the bulletin board is a newspaper photo of a local boxing hero named Marek Piotrowski. A silent television on the cigarette machine up front is tuned to a Cubs game or home-shipping channel. The front window area is cluttered with potted plants.

There are a dozen tables in the carpeted second room. One of the framed newspaper articles of politicians at the Busy Bee—rested on the back wall next to a picture-map of Poland and a photograph of Pope John Paul II—mentions that Abbie Hoffman used to be a regular here.

Up front, Sophie and another Polish woman exchange highly formalized cheek kisses. A waitress asks a man if he wants to see the menu (most regulars don’t), and he says, “Menu, what’s...
that?” “Ya know,” she shot back, “the thing you open and look at to see what to eat.”

Everything but the food is discussed at the Busy Bee, it seems. Not the cups of thick navy-bean soup, nor the fork-tender short ribs with tomato sauce, cooked-to-death green beans, or scoops of mashed potatoes and gravy that the old men eat with no expression. The more active younger working men who eat breakfast here—buttery wheat cakes, Krakus ham, and fat omelets are popular—will have other meals, but for many of the old men the daily special of soup with stuffed cabbage, meat blintzes, pork shank and sauerkraut, or roast chicken will be the only hot meal of the day. Some have it by 10:30 in the morning. On Sunday there’s crisp roast duck for families dining after church.

The food—essentially a Polish version of what Americans eat at diners across the land—is meant to fill and satisfy. It is understated, unglamorous, plain food for plain people. And some of it does not rise much above American institutional food, especially the skimpy hamburgers and the seafood, consisting of fried shrimp, fish patties, and breaded fish sticks.

A florid, round-faced old man in his seventies, his health in obvious decline, eats his dinner late in the morning, occasionally rising and stepping away from the counter to cough politely against the wall. He wears an old mismatched suitcoat and trousers and open sport shirt, and lives in the senior citizens project. He’s Polish, a steelworker who lived most of his life in Indiana. He orders the daily special of short ribs without looking at the menu, then takes a vitamin with his soup. He looks depressed and unhappy. “People shouldn’t live so long,” he complains. “Hitler put useless eaters like me in the gas chamber, when you get old and blind and can’t hear—that’s why we talk so loud, can’t hear. Christianity messed us all up with this heaven-and-hell business. The Indians had it right: just die and go to the happy hunting grounds. That’s what I want to do. Christianity is just too bloody and barbaric with all those crucifixions—and I am a Catholic saying this. Poles wouldn’t crucify anybody. Neither did the Jews. It was the Romans, then they changed their name to Italians.”

At the counter over lunch, the customers often talk more with the waitresses than with each other. The Busy Bee waitresses, and the peripatetic Sophie, are motherly and friendly. Sometimes it’s not just the camaraderie among customers that makes for a good neighborhood place, but the informal chitchat between customer and employee, whether bartender or waitress. Americans are familiar with this notion from the television series “Cheers” and from decades of bartender-as-psychiatrist cartoons. This painfully human comedy is in the tradition of joking banter, sometimes abrasive, among customers and between customers and staff in Jewish delis. Much of the social interaction—and a significant part of the culture—at the Busy Bee is like that of the archetypal Jewish deli.

But the interaction between customer and waiter is an equally important aspect of such “third places” as the Jewish deli or Polish café. As Sam Levinson wrote on this subject (“Oh, Cuisine!” Saturday Review, March 1, 1980, 45): “Ordering is the last order of business. First, you talk, that is, the waiter does most of the talking. ‘So what’s new? Why don’t you see you lately? You’re not looking so good. The chopped sirloin is not for you. Remember I told you my wife needs an operation? So, thank God, she don’t need. Take the breast of beef. You know Louie who stands by the door? He ain’t standing no more. Goes to sleep a healthy man and wakes up dead. Life is like a radish —on the outside rosy, but inside could be rotten. What do you want to eat? I ain’t got all day to talk.’”

But talk is, in fact, the main thing, more important than the food and the walls themselves. Both the place and the talk at the Busy Bee are unscripted and natural and plain, like the people who come back again and again. And, like a great, decades-old Jewish deli, the Busy Bee is organic to its soul—unlike the self-conscious, safely ragtag-ratty restaurants designed for slumming yuppies that are as contrived as holodeck computervision on the Starship Enterprise. The Busy Bee is a tough urban perennial weed hanging on in the cracks of the city. Come election time, the politicians and the cameras will be back; after election day, the Busy Bee—along with the regulars and Sophie—will go comfortably back to being just a neighborhood place.