

My Early Years

We lived in an “old law tenement”: several families on each floor, with a common toilet which was lit by a candle, the apartments lit by an open gas flame. When the flame lowered, it signaled that our gas supply was about to run out, and it was time to deposit a quarter in the meter out in the hall. Then a wonderful technology appeared. It was almost the equal of an electric light bulb: a brilliant ceramic gas mantle. There was no central heat; early each morning my mother would start the fire in the kitchen wood and coal stove.

That was a year after I was born, when my family lived on the lower east side of Manhattan. We had moved uptown to 311 East 101st Street in East Harlem, between First and Second Avenues. We resided there for nine years, from 1916 to 1925. These were my early years of growing up. I entered kindergarten on December 20, 1920 and stayed until my 6th birthday on October 26, 1921 when I was admitted to first grade in PS 121. It seems that the New York City school system was punctilious about age eligibility to the exact day. The school was nearby and I went home for lunch every day.

My teacher for the first two years was a Miss Siebold. I will remember her forever. In appearance, she resembled the taciturn wife in Grant Woods’ “American Gothic,” along side the equally stern-looking man holding the pitchfork. But she was a loving teacher among eager children who responded to her quiet, gentle ways. She inspired me to work very hard to earn her approval. I now realize that my experience with her implanted in me a lasting impetus to please every subsequent teacher in my career, and still holds true today even at HILR.

We lived then in an era when autos were for the well to do, and no one on our block had a car. We did see a lot of horse-drawn wagons and “White Wings”, uniformed men who were street cleaners. Our block, east of Second Avenue, was populated by Jewish and Italian immigrants. To the west across Second Avenue on 101st street lived the Irish folk. Their children had the advantage of parents who spoke English.

There was a rivalry between the young groups. For some reason not clear to me today, it was customary to gather up wood for a bonfire every election day. We would do it and so would the Irish kids. We would scheme to steal each other’s wood and had some battles in the process. In one such encounter I was “captured” by the Irish kids and held “prisoner”. I was made to say 100 times some foul things about my mother and father and was then released. On Election Day we would build a large fire in the middle of the street, which created great excitement among all, until the firemen came. I do not understand today why this was such a big deal, but I do have a memory of it.

The apartment was four blocks east of Central Park. I recall being taken to Fifth Avenue in 1919, when I was three or four and watching General Pershing majestically marching at the head of his troops in a victory parade. This was especially exciting for me because I previously had experienced bad dreams about German soldiers in spiked helmets coming after me.

In the early 1920’s it was common for WW1 veterans, including some wounded, to come to our street and perform acrobatic tricks on bicycles, for pennies and nickels. I remember also going to Central Park to hear concerts by Edwin Franko Goldman and his band.

Every time an airplane appeared in the sky, we would all cheer wildly at the novelty. We boys were very active physically. We played box ball, stoop ball, stick ball and many other ball games I no longer recall. We also played tag and a rougher version we called Ring O Levio.

By any standard today we were very poor, but I was never conscious of it. For example, my mother would buy 25 lb. bags of Hecker's flour for her baking. When the bag was empty, she would wash it several times to eliminate the printing. With the clear, clean cloth, she would sew "jumpers" which I would wear as a shirt.

My brother Mac built a crystal radio set in 1923 and I was allowed to listen to part of the broadcast of the Benny Leonard vs. Lew Tendler boxing match for the Lightweight Championship. That same year, my sister Hilda, who was born in Europe and came over with my mother and sister Lily in 1906, died giving birth to her second child. Her first son, Bernie, was put in my mother's care for a while by my brother in law, Sam Rothman. I was in the role of older brother and play pal. That summer, Sam arranged for us to vacation in a bungalow in Freehold, New Jersey. That was the first time I was ever in the "country". It was there I taught myself to swim the dog paddle.

I always felt well liked by my parents, relatives, neighbors, teachers and the other kids. Many adults liked to pinch my cheek, and I did not mind it a bit. In sum, I think today as I did then, that my early years were happy indeed.