

## Elementary School Days

What a different world we now live in! Parents today seem to obsess about the elementary school their children will attend. Many choose their neighborhoods based on its elementary school. This was not the case when I was a kid.

Growing up in the Bronx in the 1930s, our parents were grateful to have an apartment with affordable rent. For some, a consideration might be the area's ethnic make-up, but at the time, there were lots of Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx, as well as Irish, Italian, and small enclaves of Puerto Rican and black. Another consideration might be the neighborhood's proximity to public transportation, shopping, possibly a Shul, or a park nearby. But no parents that I was aware of, chose where they would live by its proximity to a public school.

I should note that we always referred to elementary school as public school. So did the Board of Education. Each school had a number, preceded by "P.S." standing for Public School. And the public schools were "K through 6." When we graduated from Public School, we went on to Junior High School. It also had a number which was preceded by "J.H.S," though some people also called junior high schools public schools. (They certainly were not private schools.) Most junior high schools were "7 through 9." To confuse matters, there were elementary schools that were "K through 8." Students from those schools went on to high school without bothering with junior high school. High schools were four year schools—from first to eighth term, or ninth grade to twelfth grade. However, when you entered high school from junior high school, you were put in third term or tenth grade. Sounds confusing, but it wasn't. I believe junior high school today is called middle school.

My elementary school was P.S. 62. Even though I lived on Fox Street and Longwood Avenue, a block away from P.S. 39, which was on Beck Street and Longwood Avenue, I was sent to an elementary school two blocks away, on Fox Street and Leggett Avenue. You have to draw school boundaries somewhere. All of us attending P.S. 62 felt we went to the better school. I am not sure what makes one school better than another in those days. A newer plant? A smaller student body? Better teachers and administrators? Perhaps the ethnic makeup of the student body? There were two small minority neighborhoods, one black and one Puerto Rican, that fed into P.S. 39. This was not the case with P.S. 62.

Now to my memory of P.S. 62: It was OK. I liked the school, and I liked going to school. I liked most of my teachers and classmates. I liked learning stuff. I was a good student for the most part. I was good in English and history and geography. I was a good reader and speller. Other kids were better than me in math and science. I entered first grade in February 1934 when I was six years old, and was placed in 1A2. My teacher for the year was Mrs. Taff. (I am sure I found her name somewhere and it was spelled TAFF.) The "2" classes were for the slower students. The following year I entered 2A1, (for the brighter students) so I must have demonstrated something.

Thanks to having kept my junior high school autograph album, in which I listed all my teachers from 1A to 9B, I have the names of all my elementary school teachers. Only three of them stand out: In third grade, there was Mrs. Soskin. The reason I remember her was because she had asked to meet with my mother. I do not believe the request had anything to do with bad behavior on my part. Mrs. Soskin was that rare teacher who exuded concern and love for her students. It

was difficult for my mother to come to school, although I believe she had joined the Parent-Teacher Association, and attended their meetings in the evening. This meeting was after school, and the three of us were seated in the classroom, at her desk. I assume she told my mother about my work in class, But the meeting had a different purpose. It was 1936, my mother was unable to find work, we were on relief, and I was one of the few students in my class getting free lunch. It must have been obvious to Mrs. Soskin that I was ashamed to be getting free lunch. It was a stigma. At this meeting, she told me a story of a little girl (it might have been Mrs. Soskin) who wore an old dress to school that her mother had patched. Her mother told her to be proud. The dress was clean, and she should wear the patch as if it were a badge of honor. I was nine years old, but Mrs. Soskin could not convince me that a patch was a badge of honor. Still, I loved her for the attention she paid me, and for her understanding how I felt. I don't remember having a similar feeling for any other teacher.

The second teacher that I remember was my 4A teacher, Mrs. Banks. She was the opposite of Mrs. Soskin. Mrs. Banks exuded a feeling of unconcern and disdain. It was clear to me from the first that she did not like me, and I didn't like her. I occasionally made wisecracks in class, and she jumped all over me. Mrs. Banks also punished me for laughing when someone mentioned "underwear." It was childish of me, but the fact is, I was a child. I don't have any idea what the punishment was, but I certainly felt I didn't deserve to be punished for laughing at the mention of underwear. Years later, a comedian being interviewed, said that the funniest word he knows was "belly-button." I must admit, it is funnier than underwear.

Finally, there was Fay Katz Young, my 5B and 6B teacher. In 6B, I was 12 years old, and the hormones were kicking in. I had a crush on two girls in my class, but I was in love with Mrs. Young, replacing Mrs. Soskin. Mrs. Young was tall, and as beautiful as a movie actress—though more like Joan Crawford than Elizabeth Taylor. She was the only elementary school teacher whose first (and middle) name I knew. I believe I tried to do well in her class to impress her. Again, two images of Mrs. Young have stayed with me all these years: She would rise up on her toes while standing in front of the room. It was clearly a strengthening exercise, but I thought it was neat, and made her even taller. I later learned in Hebrew school that when we were praying and said "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh" (Holy, Holy, Holy), we would rise up on our toes. I don't believe Mrs. Young was praying when she did it. The second image. Mrs. Young had a lovely wool coat with a big fur collar. I was crazy about that fur collar. When we were dismissed, and Mrs. Young had her coat on, I always tried to maneuver to be near her as we left so I could touch the fur.

During the '30s, Jewish teachers were beginning to take over from the Irish Catholics who took over from the Protestants. Of my nine teachers (I had three teachers for two terms), six were Jewish. I had nothing to do with the Principal or Assistant Principal. The worst thing that could happen to you was getting in trouble and being sent to the Principal's office. The best thing was to be selected by your teacher to take a note to the Principal's office. But then you might be considered "teacher's pet" and that was not good. We only saw the Principal and Assistant Principal at Assembly. The Assistant Principal ran the show, and the Principal might briefly address the students. The Principal was Mrs. Karshar and she was a lot like Mrs. Soskin. The Assistant Principal was Mrs. O'Donnell and she was a lot like Mrs. Banks. It was "good cop" "bad cop." I was intrigued that during my six years at P.S. 62, Mrs. O'Donnell had gotten married, and her name changed from Miss O'Neal. She was an older woman, and I thought she would always be Miss O'Neal. It was also taken for granted that all elementary school teachers

were women. I believe a decade or two before, married women could not teach in the New York schools. And it took another decade or two before men were permitted to teach in elementary school.

So what did we learn? Everything. The impression I had was that elementary school was an introduction to knowledge, provided by generalists. We learned how to write. Penmanship was very important—the Palmer Method. The girls always had better handwriting than the boys. We learned arithmetic and memorized our multiplication tables, and if you were unsure, it was on the back of our notebooks. We learned history and geography. Every classroom had a map of the United States and a map of the world, as well as the alphabet in cursive upper and lower case running above the blackboard. We learned English—grammar, punctuation, spelling (I liked the spelling bees), vocabulary, prefixes and suffixes. And we put on plays, and memorized our lines. In one play, I was Isaac Newton. My costume was a bathrobe (over the clothes I wore to school.) By the time we graduated, we were well prepared for seventh grade.

To me, junior high school enabled us to go into greater depth in the subjects we had learned, and with teachers who were specialists, and without girls. We then went on to high school (without girls) and to college where we were supposed to learn even more, and different subjects. But in elementary school we learned how to learn. I developed a curiosity about the world around me, and I developed a love of books and reading. The school introduced me to the library, which became an extension of whatever I was exposed to at school. I had only one book as a child, a pop-up book of fairy tales, but I could get all the books I wanted at the Hunt's Point Library.

I don't remember making "friends" in elementary school. We had our friends from the "block" and we all went to school together. My best friend, Larry Wilson, who lived in the adjoining apartment house, was in 1A2 with me, but was not placed in 2A1. I felt bad, but there was nothing we could do about it. He remained "my best friend." Across the street, lived David Goldman. We were in the same class, but though we lived on the same block, we really weren't friends. Turns out he was a bully, and he picked on a lot of the kids in my class, including me. The high point of my elementary school experience came in fourth or fifth grade when he picked a fight with me. I was not a fighter, but we exchanged punches and I actually knocked him down, or he may have slipped. For that moment, I became a hero. I was also fortunate to have Sheldon Greenberg as a friend. I have no idea how we became friends. He was much bigger and stronger than any of the other boys in our class. It was known that Sheldon was my friend, so the other kids didn't mess with me.

There were several boys in my class who lived on the next block. To clarify: my block was Fox Street between Longwood Avenue and 156 Street. The next block was Fox Street between 156 Street and Leggett Avenue. Irving Plotnick and Sidney Reiter lived on the next block. As we moved on to junior high and high school, we became friends. There were also several boys who went to P.S. 62 with me and who also went to my Hebrew school: Bert Siegelstein, Paul Rosenbluth and Irving Beyersky. The fact that we were in two schools together reinforced their names. But even that did not make them friends. It was the block that defined your friends. Across the street were Dominick (Danny) Lalla, and Stanley Harris. And in Larry's house was Miltie Greenspan. Marvin Bernstein and Edmond and Harold Handwerger lived in my house. All of them were my friends, though Miltie and Edmond were a little older, and Harold was a little younger. We all went to 62, we all hung out around the block. For some weird reason, the name, Joseph Zamek, has haunted me for all these years. He was in my class, but we were not

friends. What stands out and makes Joseph Zamek unique is that he wore a white starched shirt to school every day. None of the other boys wore white starched shirts. Only Joseph Zamek. I believe he also had carefully combed, Brillcreamed hair. He was our class's best dressed student.

It was in fifth and sixth grade that I became aware of the girls in our class. Up to that time, I don't remember having anything to do with them. Our class must have had between 30 and 40 kids, half of whom were girls. I can only remember the two girls on whom I had a crush: Rita Feit and Phyllis Flyer. I, of course, did nothing about it, just day dreamed. Rita was dark haired and medium height; Phyllis was blond and tall. Toward the end of sixth grade, I had told a friend of my feelings for Phyllis, and one day after school, we went to her apartment house, and I called out, "Phyllis, I love you!" And we ran away. The school is also known as "the Casanova school," but I doubt if the name had anything to do with my behavior that day.

In June 1940, I graduated from P.S. 62. I was fortunate to have been promoted to 7AR, the Rapid Advance track, which meant that I would be skipping a term. Several of my classmates went into 7A1. The gift that my mother gave me, that was sold by the school, was a silver lapel pin that read "P.S. 62" and attached to it by a silver chain was "40." When I got my first suit for my Bar Mitzvah, I pinned it to my lapel. There were very few opportunities for me to display the pin. I now have it in a position of prominence on the black felt board in my hallway, along with all my other pins.

6-13-12