

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
My Most Favorite Educational Experience
(And My Longest Memoir)

Introduction

It is mid-December, 2011, and for the past month I have been reliving my life in junior high school. For weeks, I would wake up with memories of still another aspect of those 2 ½ years. Usually, when I write something, I edit out extraneous material; the final version is much shorter than the original draft. With this memoir, I found myself adding material. How could I not have mentioned X, and I was impelled to incorporate it. My junior high school days kept growing. I began thinking that those days were more significant than I gave them credit for, and I had already given them a great deal of credit. I now believe the years between 12 and 14 laid the foundation for everything that followed. So here it is.

Entering Junior High, and Before

I entered JHS 52, Thomas Knowlton Junior High School, in February 1940. I was 12 years old. I had come from PS 62, also called the Casanova School, which was co-ed. JHS 52 was an all boys school. I remember those first days, walking to 52 with trepidation. We had been warned that the ninth graders were giants, that they beat up the incoming seventh graders, and cut off their ties. Fortunately, that didn't happen.

Speaking of walking to school, the trek to first grade at PS 62 was initially a traumatic experience, despite the fact that there was not much traffic. My mother walked with me for the first few weeks: one block south, up Fox Street to 156 Street; cross the street and walk another block to Leggett Avenue; cross the street again, and there we were. The school was on the corner of Leggett Avenue and Fox Street.

Walking on my own, I was supposed to ask an adult to "cross me" when I reached the corner. I was also supposed to go to the Isaac Gerson Foundation Hebrew Day Nursery, on Beck Street and 156 Street, after school, where my mother would pick me up. I had attended the nursery prior to first grade. As a six year old, I was not entrusted with a house key. Most of the time, instead of going to the nursery, I came home and hung out. My mother became very upset when she went to the nursery and I was not there. I eventually got a key (which I kept losing.) After first grade, walking back and forth to school was no longer an issue.

JHS 52 was two blocks past PS 62. West up Leggett Avenue from Fox Street, past Beck Street to Kelly Street. During the 2 ½ years that I attended JHS 52, my mother had me take our laundry to a steam laundry on Leggett Avenue. Once a week, I would drop it off in the morning and pick it up after school. When I was not returning from school with the laundry, I would walk down Beck Street hoping to see Sallie Mae Pollack who lived at 722 Beck Street.

Beck Street, between 156 and Leggett was unusual. It was tree-lined, and there were no apartment houses; there were charming brownstones, and the Kavenoff family lived in one of them. Sallie Mae's mother was a Kavenoff. A few doors down in the basement of another

brownstone was the Arbeter Ring Shule, the Yiddish school that I attended before my mother transferred me to Hebrew School, and to which I returned after my Bar Mitzvah. The nursery was also on this block, and on the corner was the Juvenile House.

I had a short four block walk to 52. Some of my classmates came to school from the Hunts Point area and beyond, a mile or more away. Ten years later, I was followed to 52 by Colin Powell, who also lived near Hunts Point, and who went on to the neighborhood high school, Morris, and then to CCNY. Preceding me was the playwright Clifford Odets. I don't know where he went to high school.

When I woke up on school days, my routine was essentially the same: straighten my bed, wash, dress, turn on the radio and have breakfast. My breakfast consisted of juice, a soft-boiled egg, toast and milk. My radio listening consisted of Phil Cook, who, when he ended his program at 8 am, would sign off with the song:

“Try and live today
So tomorrow you can say
What a wonderful yesterday.

“Let's not borrow sorrow
For tomorrow's skies may clear.
Life is what you make it
So just take it while it's here.”

My God! I remembered the whole damn thing, and that was over 70 years ago! It was a great way for me to start the day. I believe when Phil Cook retired, he was followed by Arthur Godfrey. More about radio when I discuss my after school activities.

Most of the time, I would walk to 52 by myself. If I saw one of my friends walking, we would join up. There were at least 10 or 15 boys on my block or the next block, who were also going to 52. About five were on my grade; the rest were either a year ahead or a year behind. The former bully, and now my friend, David Goldman, lived across the street, as did Danny Lala, and Stanley Harris. On my side of the street were Eddie Handwerker, whose parents owned the dry cleaning store on Longwood Avenue; my best friend Larry Wilson; Miltie Greenspan who lived in the same apartment house with Larry; and Seymour Mirchin and Eugene Alperin. Eugene was very handsome and went out with girls, years before any of the rest of us. On the next block were Irving Plotnick, Sidney Reiter, and my tough friend, Sheldon Greenberg. Phil Bernstein had lived on Fox Street, but then his family moved around the corner to Southern Blvd. Only Irv and Sid, who were in my class in PS 62, were with me from 7AR through 9BR.

A whole slew of kids came to 52 from PS 39, the other feeder school, which was on Longwood Avenue and Beck Street. PS 39 had more black and Puerto Rican kids than 62, but still not that many. My guess is under 20%. Whoever drew the district lines routed our block to 62, even though we were closer to 39. Among the kids from 39, was Sol Rauch. We became good friends during that first semester in 7AR.

I had the feeling that both school and class assignments were largely arbitrary. I guess class assignments considered previous class performance, and “Intelligence Test” results, but where

do you draw the line? I don't remember when the IQ tests were given, but we all wanted to know our score. The teachers would not tell us, but it was in their record book. When the teacher was out of the room, we would sneak up to the desk and look it up. I believe mine was 134, which I thought was pretty good, since "average intelligence" was supposed to be 100.

As we worked our way through elementary school (also called grade school or public school), we were aware that there was a range of "intelligence" among us. There were bright kids, average kids and slow kids. The teachers and the administrators assigned us to classes according to their evaluation of us. The "1" class was for the brightest. And in descending order: 3,4,5 and 2. And then there was something called "ungraded" for the slowest, or most difficult students.

No matter where you were in school, there was always the fear of "being left back," being required to repeat a semester. Nothing could be worse. There were students at 52 who were a year or two older than their classmates. They had been "left back." Conversely, there were a few of the brightest kids who, having shown their mastery of the subject matter, were "skipped," I actually felt sorry for a few kids who had skipped because they were younger and smaller than the others in their class, and felt out of place.

This was not the case with the "Rs." If you were assigned to 7AR, as Sol and I were, you did three years of junior high in 2 ½, as a class. If not, you were placed in 7A1. How much brighter were the students in 7AR? Bob Epstein, Phil Bernstein and Mel Schulman, who became three of my closest friends, were placed in 7A1, and were then moved to 9AR for their last year. They did not skip a term as Sol and I did. Alex Roth and Sid Stern, who attended PS 39, also made the "Rs," but they were a term behind us.

Kids today carry their books in knapsacks. This was unknown in my day. The more well-to-do had school bags. I and most of my friends simply used a strap which held our text books and note book. The note book was either hard covered (more expensive) or soft covered. The cover was marbled, black and white, with the multiplication table on the back. We may have had a pencil case, which we jammed in under the strap. If we were taking math, the pencil case would have contained a compass and a protractor. Some of us had a pencil sharpener. Toward the end of junior high, my mother gave me a pen knife which belonged to my father, which I used to sharpen pencils.

The transition from PS 62 to JHS 52 meant that we were able to move from class to class. In 62, one teacher taught us most everything—English, history, geography, math, science. We remained in the same classroom. In 52, we started out in our home room, but then we would go to different classrooms for different subjects with different teachers. It was much more grown up. The junior high school teachers were subject matter specialists. They knew more about their subject than the elementary school teachers.. Junior high was also our introduction to hall and staircase monitors, and staircases labeled "up" and "down."

A serious concern of many students at every level was bullies. My children have horror stories of bullies, which I only learned about much later. The only bully I remember was the previously mentioned David Goldman, who was in my class in PS 62. It was in fourth or fifth grade that he picked on me until he provoked a fight. I certainly was not a fighter. Somehow I managed to survive that experience, and even knocked him down. (Unless he tripped.) After that, no more

bullying. Besides, the toughest guy in my class, Sheldon Greenberg, was my friend, which helped. I don't remember bullies in junior high.

Though I have a vivid memory of those 2 ½ years, it has been augmented by my having saved the graduation program, dated June 25, 1942. It listed the names of all the graduates and indicated who made the Honor Roll, and who received the service award, the "Knowlton K." I also have the January and June 1942 copies of the Knowlton Herald, the combination literary magazine and yearbook, a valuable source of information. I doubt if there are many of them still around. I am sure I kept them because they contained two of my stories and a poem, and I was listed on the masthead as a member of the staff. Another valuable resource (about which I will write later) was my autograph album. And thanks to a relatively recently discovered classmate, Bert Siegelstein, I have a copy of the 9BR graduation photograph, and I was able to name practically everyone in our class.

Not only can I remember the names of my classmates, I can remember almost all of my junior high school teachers. Why, since I do not remember many of my high school and college teachers, did my junior high school teachers make such an impression? Perhaps I was at my most impressionable during those years, and perhaps they happened to be good teachers.

I do remember my elementary school teachers, but only two of them were really "memorable." Mrs. Soskin was my third grade teacher, and she was warm, wise and loving. Aware that I may have been embarrassed by the fact that we were on relief, and I was getting "free lunch," she told me a story about a child who had a patch on his jacket, and he wore it with pride, as if it were a badge. Be proud, she was saying. There is nothing to be ashamed of. (And it is allright to end a sentence with a preposition.)

My sixth grade teacher was Mrs. Young. She was tall, very pretty, an inspiring teacher, and she had a coat with a fur collar, which I tried to touch whenever I had the opportunity. She frequently rose up on her toes, while standing in front of the classroom, as if to make herself even taller, or as if she were davening "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh." All the rest: Hogan, Weingarten, McGlaughlin, Leiberman, Wolfson and Banks were forgettable.

The Times, They Were A'Changing

Today, kids usually start school in September. We entered school in both February and September. I started first grade in February 1934, having turned six the previous December. In February 1940, entering seventh grade, we were finally coming out of the depression, but my mother still did not have work, and we were still on relief. She soon found work in a WPA garment shop.

World War II started in September 1939, and my mother was worried about her sister in Paris and her brother in Vaslui, Romania, and their families. The correspondence that we carried on with them had stopped. The summer of 1940, I went away for a month to Camp Northrop, a nature camp. To be selected to attend the camp, applicants had to pass a nature test. It was my first term in junior high school. That spring, in addition to doing my class work, my cousin Louis coached me on "nature" for the Northrop exam. In the fall, I began preparing for my Bar Mitzvah. More studying, in addition to my class work. It was tough learning to chant my Haftorah. Learning the speech, written by my Hebrew School teacher, thanking my mother and

my teacher, and commenting on the Torah portion, was easier. I was also involved in campaigning for FDR who was running for an unprecedented third term. (I had previously convinced my neighbors to vote for FDR in 1936.) At 12, FDR, was my hero, as were our Mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, and our Governor, Herbert Lehman.

It felt good being in junior high; more grown up and independent. In elementary school, we lined up by class, in the schoolyard, or the inside yard. We then went to our classroom as a group. In junior high, if we came early, we milled around the schoolyard, then went directly to our “home rooms.” We were supposed to be in our home rooms by 8:30. We put our coats in the closet, attendance was taken, announcements were read, and a bell was rung for our first class. We would walk through the halls, supervised by both teachers and hall monitors. We went up and down the stairs, supervised by staircase monitors. After the last morning class, we returned to our home rooms, from which we were dismissed for lunch.

Lunch

Lunch was between 12 noon and 1 pm. Most of my classmates went home for lunch. Some of them brought their lunch, and ate them in designated classrooms. There was no lunch room. Those of us who received “free lunch” went to the second floor where it was served. A couple of classrooms were designated for the purpose. We lined up, took trays and were served a watery soup, a sandwich, milk and either fresh or canned fruit.

I felt stigmatized, receiving free lunch. It meant that you were poor. I have already written about the experience of receiving a winter jacket which had been distributed to the children on relief. I came to the school yard one morning and noticed 10 or 15 other kids wearing the same jacket. It may not have been obvious to other kids, but those of us who were wearing them saw it as a sign that said, “We are poor.” One of those kids, Tony Rodriguez, was in my class. A week or two later, he came to school with another jacket. I asked him where was the “relief” jacket. He said, with a smile, that he threw it in a fire, and told his mother that he tripped and fell into the fire, but didn’t get hurt. His mother was so thankful that nothing happened to Tony, that she bought him another jacket.

Assembly

An important part of the junior high school experience was “assembly.” Once a week the entire school would line up by class and go to the auditorium. We lined up by height, with a monitor in front and in the back. It reminded me of prison movies with James Cagney and George Raft. Height took on a value which frequently determined how you were viewed by others. It was better to be tall than short. I felt lucky to have been among the taller boys in our class. We were seated in our classes by height, with the shorter boys in front. It seemed to make sense. One of the smallest boys in our class was nicknamed “mousy.” I did not view it as complimentary. After we lined up, there could be no talking.

We entered the auditorium, took our seats, and when every class was seated, the Principal or Assistant Principal would greet us. I believe he then read a passage from the Bible. There was a “color guard” which walked down the aisle with the flag; we would then recite the Pledge of Allegiance. (At some point in my school experience, the Pledge was amended to add “under God.”) We also sang the Star Spangled Banner. Each week awards were given out to classes for

something or other—no latenesses, best attendance. The President of the class receiving the award would go to the front of the auditorium to accept it. I can still see Phil Bernstein as he casually strode down the aisle, during our last year at 52. He was cool. There were also announcements, pep talks, and singing: Miss Haver at the piano and Mrs. Lubin leading all of us, waving her hands and mouthing the words. Despite the fact that I was labeled a “listener,” I sang along with everyone else. In our music classes, we learned the songs of the season, the busiest season being Thanksgiving and Christmas. The songs had a religious overtone, but nobody seemed to mind. We sang them in assembly. The schools are more sensitive these days.

Teachers and Subjects

Junior high school was a wonderful learning experience, thanks to wonderful teachers. Our elementary school teachers introduced us to all the usual subjects. Now we went into them in depth. My English teachers made the greatest impression on me: Mrs. Merten, Mrs. Davis and Miss Jensen. Mrs. Davis was the only black teacher that I had. They were all older women; I would guess in their 60s. They taught us grammar, sentence structure, creative writing, and they introduced us to great literature. We read Shakespeare, and memorized poems, sonnets and soliloquies. The mention of Shakespeare reminds me of an exchange between a teacher and student in ninth grade English. We were reading aloud from a Shakespeare play, when my classmate came upon the word “whore.” He pronounced the word “who-ah.” The teacher stopped him and told him that it is pronounced “hore” like “more” or “core.” He looked at the teacher and shook his head and said, “I always pronounce it “who-ah.” (How times have changed: today on the street, it is pronounced, “hoe.”

We were encouraged to read lots of books, and I read lots of books. My mother had a bookcase filled with Yiddish books, which she had bought when times were good. Soon after I came along, times turned bad. I remember having only one book, when I was seven or eight. It was a “pop-up” book of fairy tales: Puss in Boots, Hansel and Gretel, Rumpelstiltskin. For my Bar Mitzvah, I received two books: Laughs from Jewish Lore (which I still have) and a book by Richard Halliburton.

It was during junior high school that I really became “a reader.” I had gotten my library card while I was in elementary school, and would go to the Hunts Point Library regularly. The children’s section was one flight up. I entered the library, turned to the right, and against the wall were shelves and shelves of children’s fiction, arranged alphabetically. My favorites at this time were Barbour and Heyliger who wrote about high school sports teams. And Howard Pease who specialized in nautical adventures—cabin boys on steamships, pirates on the high seas, intrigue in foreign ports. Toward the end of junior high school, I graduated to the bookcases labeled “Books for Older Children” and I started reading Dickens, and Dumas and Mark Twain. In my autograph album, I claimed that “The Three Musketeers” was my favorite book.

To confirm my memory, I googled “children’s authors” and came up with lots of stuff. It turns out that Barbour and Heyliger were among the most popular boys fiction writers of the period, but the most popular was Altscheler, whose name I vaguely remember. Both Barbour and Heliger had been reporters and switched to writing juvenile fiction. They each wrote over 150 books. Both wrote about sports in prep schools and colleges. Both had heroes who excelled, were honorable, and hard working. I am not sure why I remembered Pease’s first name but not Barbour’s ((Ralph) nor Heliger’s (William). Also, I remembered the names of a couple of

Pease's books, *The Jinx Ship*, and *The Tattooed Man*. I thought his hero was a cabin boy; he was a mess boy. My library reading included magazines, I spent hours in the library reading *Boy's Life*, *Popular Mechanics* and *National Geographic* (looking for pictures of bare breasted African women.)

History teachers Ned Levin was cool, and Mr. Rothfeder was very big, had thick glasses and a handshake that almost broke your knuckles. He was the Debating Club advisor. We also had classes in Geography and Civics, all of which came under the heading of social studies. We did a lot of memorizing in social studies as well as in English. We entered World War II with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Sunday December 7, 1941. The next day we had a special assembly and heard President Roosevelt declare war, calling the day of the attack, "a date which will live in infamy." I was in 9AR. We had been following the progress of the war in our history class from the time I entered 52. Several of my classmates were very knowledgeable, especially Augie Iglesias, who was an expert on the war in Yugoslavia.

I was aware of what was happening in Germany in the '30s with the rise of Hitler and anti-Semitism, from discussions in Hebrew School, from my mother's reading of her Yiddish newspaper, "The Day," and listening to news on the Yiddish language station, WEVD. We did not buy an English language newspaper. That was an indulgence we did not think we could afford, even though the News and the Mirror were two cents and the Times was three cents. However, when the newspaper PM came out in June 1940, I knew it was historic, and bought a copy of the first edition for five cents. By the end of junior high school, I decided I wanted to be a social studies teacher.

The teacher who, without a doubt, made the greatest impression on three of my closest friends, was our science teacher, Mr. Mandel. Phil Bernstein, Mel Schulman and Alex Roth all credit Mr. Mandel with turning them on to science. That is what a good teacher is supposed to do. Phil and Mel stayed after school and worked with Mr. Mandel on chemistry. Alex, who had been involved, on his own, in several scientific projects involving electricity, actually went to Mr. Mandel's house for help.

Foreign language was part of our curriculum. However, only one foreign language was offered—French-- and there was only one foreign language teacher--Miss Garmir. She was French, and easily intimidated by unruly ninth grade boys. Like dogs who supposedly can tell when someone is afraid of them, our class could tell that Miss Garmir was afraid of us. No other teacher showed signs of fear. We were never disruptive in any other class. The high point (or low point) of our behavior: we entered the classroom one day and Miss Garmir was not there. Her record book was on her desk. One outrageously nervy classmate took the record book off her desk and threw it out the window. We did learn French and were admitted to third term French in high school. I was a poor French student, but I do not blame Miss Garmir. She did her best.

One of the subjects we all liked was typing. We were thrilled to be able to sit at a typewriter, which none of us owned, learning the keyboard, and learning how to "touch-type." It was not easy, but we plugged away at it: "a s d f g f" etc. And we liked the teachers, Mrs. Kerchof and Mr. Fried. We certainly didn't have anything like it in elementary school. My friend Irving Plotnick was the best typist in our class, and when he was in high school his father, a furrier, bought him an old Remington manual typewriter, which weighted a ton. Irv typed his father's bills on it, as well as his homework, and term papers. The rest of us hand wrote everything.

We were given a wonderful introduction to music. We listened to classical music and were provided with words, enabling us to remember the melody: "This is the symphony that Schubert wrote and never finished." And we sang folk songs, and the Ballad for Americans, and we put on a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's HMS Pinafore, and a school play where we sang lots of folk songs. The play was called, The Land of the Free. I was designated "a listener" but I learned the songs. I was not supposed to sing when the class performed. Our music teachers could not have been more different. Mrs. Lubin was an older woman, very serious. Miss Haver, was young and very attractive, and it was rumored that she and Mr. Mandel were having an affair.

Shop classes were the high point of the day. There was wood shop with Dr. H.B.R. Lichtman, and sheet metal shop. We learned to use tools, and we made useful objects like a tie rack in wood shop and a dust pan in metal shop. Print shop with Mr. Lyman was magical. I loved the smell of the ink and the sound of the printing press. We learned to hold a printer's stick and take the letters from the boxes and assemble words, then sentences, then paragraphs, and finally a page. Our literary magazine, "Knowlton Herald" was printed in our print shop by the students, and illustrated with linoleum cuts, made by the students in the Linoleum Club. How many other junior high schools published a literary magazine? For some reason, PT (physical training) made no impression on me.

After School

We were dismissed at 3 pm and most of us went straight home. A few guys may have stayed around the schoolyard and played ball. A few may have had some volunteer after school duties, or were being kept after school as punishment. Most of the Jewish kids went to Hebrew school at some point between school dismissal and supper. They usually quit Hebrew School after Bar Mitzvah. (My Bar Mitzvah was at the end of my second semester at 52, but though I left Hebrew School, my mother sent me back to the Yiddish school, which I attended until the end of junior high.) Hanging around the block was an important after school activity. We talked, we played ball, we engaged in whatever the seasonal activity might have been: skating, marbles, bottle caps, trading cards. And then we headed upstairs. The street became deserted. If the weather was bad, I would go upstairs and listen to programs like Jack Armstrong or Little Orphan Annie.

My mother would make supper. Coming home from work, she found shortcuts to put a meal on the table. My mother would open a can of Campbell's vegetable soup, put it in a pot, and heat it up; put hamburgers or liver or some other meat in a pan; serve the soup without the vegetables, while the meat was broiling. Then serve the vegetables from the vegetable soup with the meat. Sometimes my mother would serve canned salmon or tuna with a salad, or noodles and cheese. For dessert, canned fruit.

After supper, I would do my homework. I had a constant battle with my mother who insisted, "Do not do your homework with the radio on." I tried to tell her I could do both. I seldom won that battle. But when I told her I finished my homework, I was then allowed to listen to "my programs:" The Lone Ranger, The Shadow, The Green Hornet. Inner Sanctum. However if one of my programs came on at 9 pm, my mother's insisted that Gabriel Heatter take precedence. So I put on my program at 9:15 pm and tried to imagine what took place during the first 15 minutes. There were several programs that we listened to together: The Goldbergs, Lux Radio Theatre,

Amos and Andy, The Quiz Kids, Information Please. And the comedians: Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Edgar Bergen, Milton Berle. I am blurring the weekday programs with the Sunday programs. There were also the news commentators, in addition to Gabriel Heatter: Walter Winchell, Raymond Gram Swing, Johannes Steele, H.V. Kaltenborn, and J. Raymond Walsh.

During our last semester, we were confronted with the earth-shaking question: where do we go to high school? I immediately selected Townsend Harris, the very prestigious exam school on 23rd Street in Manhattan. It was considered the CCNY “prep school.” The other prestigious exam schools were Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech. Prior to making application, we met with an “advisor.” Her name was Rhea Fox. When I met with her, she looked at my record and told me that I was not Townsend Harris material. I was stunned. I told her I planned to apply anyway. Her attitude was: “it’s your funeral.” However, during the spring of 1942, New York City, in order to save money, closed Townsend Harris, so I never found out if I was Townsend Harris material.

I, and most of my classmates, applied to Stuyvesant. A few others applied to Science and Tech. Our teachers worked with us, preparing us for the exams. An indication of how good our teachers were (or how smart we were): almost all of us passed. The Knowlton Herald carried Norman Perlmutter’ story, The Stuyvesant Test. He described how we nervously left 52, took the subway to 14th Street, and entered the high school auditorium where the tests were distributed—vocabulary, a paragraph test (?) and math and algebra. If Norman said that was what the test consisted of, I believe him. No one in my class wanted to go to the district high school, Morris.

I would guess that outstanding schools would attract outstanding teachers. High school teachers would vie to teach in the “exam” schools. Elementary and junior high teachers would want to teach in wealthy neighborhoods. JHS 52 was not in a wealthy neighborhood, but we had several outstanding teachers. Actually, it was the early 1940s and we were coming out of the depression, and if you had a job teaching in the NYC school system, you were lucky. My guess is that close to half the student body was Jewish. 9BR had 36 students; 28 were Jewish and five were Puerto Rican. My calculation, using name recognition: 111 of the 225 graduates in June 1942 were Jewish. By the late 40s, the ethnic make-up of the school was changing.

When I was a substitute teacher at 52 for a few days in 1950, the school was majority Puerto Rican and black. I do not believe any of my teachers were still in the school. My friends and I returned to the school 50 years later. We were revisiting the old neighborhood, or the Shtetl, as Bob Epstein calls it. We met the Principal who was Puerto Rican. The Principal when we went to 52 was Jewish. She had little idea of the history of the school, and was surprised to know that there was a school song. We were shown the auditorium, and spontaneously burst out into song:

“Rah for dear old Knowlton.
Shout til the rafters ring.
Rah for dear old Knowlton once again.
Let every man in Knowlton sing.
We’ll sing of all the happy hours.
Sing of the care free days.
Sing of dear old alma mater.
The school of our heart always.”

There is another stanza which begins: “We’ll be true, we’ll be true...” but I can no longer remember what it was that we will be true to. But we remembered it then.

The Autograph Album

Graduation from junior high school was a major event in my life, at the time, surpassed only by my Bar Mitzvah. I was excited by the prospect of going on to high school, but saddened at the thought of leaving 52. My mother allowed me one indulgence as her graduation gift. When I graduated from elementary school, she let me buy a silver lapel pin. It consisted of a small rectangle with a P on top and an S on the bottom, and “62” in the center, connected with a thin silver chain to “40,” my graduation year. In retrospect, I see it as “aroysegevarfene gelt,” thrown away money, but I still have it.

This time, I didn’t buy a pin, nor did I buy our graduation picture. I bought an autograph album. There were two kinds: one with a zipper, and the cheaper one with a clasp. I got the one with a clasp. When my friend Sol died, his children found his autograph album, and not knowing what to do with it, they sent it to me. His had a zipper.

Comparing the contents of both albums, I realized how similar the entries were. At the beginning of the album, was a page titled “Favorites.” For Book, Sol chose The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. I chose The Three Musketeers. For Game, Sol’s choice was stickball; mine was baseball. For Chum, Sol picked Marvin Peyser and me. And I picked Sol and Larry Wilson. We both selected CCNY for College. On the next page, Class Officers, we of course had the same entries: Philip Bernstein as President, and David Mass as Vice President. (I think, ay 52, they were designated Captain and Lieutenant.) I was the Class Secretary, but since the list included Treasurer, Sol put me in as Treasurer as well.

Having the albums at hand, I don’t have to rely on memory to share what my fellow classmates wrote. The last week before graduation, the halls of 52 were alive with the scurrying of the graduating class, albums in hand, cornering other classmates and teachers. The aim was to fill up your album, as if the graduate who filled the most pages, got a prize. Teachers usually just signed their names. The teachers who were special, wrote something special for you. My favorite English teacher, P. T. (Pauline Turner) Davis wrote “Steadiness is one of your fine qualities. Success to you,” A few teachers wrote Best Wishes, or Sincerely, or Good Luck. Looking through Sol’s album, I was impressed that our gorgeous music teacher, R. Sybil Haver, wrote “You’ll talk your way through, I’m sure.” There has to be a fascinating story behind that.

Very few of us were original. The same inscriptions appeared year after year in junior high school autograph albums across the land:

“You asked me to write, What shall it be? Two little words. “Remember Me.””

“When on this page you chance to look, Just think of me and close the book.”

I wrote the following in several albums: “First comes love. Then comes marriage. Then comes (Sol, Phil, Bob etc) with a perambulator.”

“Here’s to those who wish you well. And those who don’t can go to ‘Morris.’”

“If all the girls lived across the sea, What wonderful swimmers we would be.”

“If writing in a book, Remembrance assures. With the greatest of pleasure, I will write in yours.”

“UR 2 Y’s UR 2 B ICUR 2 Y’s 4 me.”

“He who only hopes is hopeless.”

“Remember once, remember twice. Remember the time We rolled the dice.”

“I am no poet, I have no fame. Just to do you a favor, I’ll sign my name.”

“If you sit on the tack of ambition, you will surely rise,”

“When you get married And have a shiny new car, Remember me, the guy from 9BR.”
Another ‘When you get married...poem: “When you get married And your wife asks for a drink, Just give her a cup, And show her the sink.”

“In Central Park There is a rock, And on it says Forget me not.”

“Friend is a word of royal tone. Friend is a poem all alone.”

“In your golden chain of friendship, Regard me as a link.”

“When you are low and feeling blue, Just think of the days in 52.”

One of my classmates looked for a page with a certain color, and wrote: “May you never be as blue as this page.”

Another classmate had this as his favorite inscription: “First in the album, Best of the lot, first to be remembered, Last to be forgot.” I didn’t have the heart to tell him that it should be written on the first page of the album, not in the middle.

In addition to the clever poem or saying, I was surprised to see how my classmates addressed me: I was Jake, Jaky, Jakie, Jacke, Jakob, Jacob. J.S., and Schlitt, To Tony Rodriguez, I was Schlittenbergen.

And how did my classmates close their entries? Your pal; your classmate; your friend; your fellow grad-u-8; your fellow grad-u-past tense of to eat; a fellow grad; your brother graduate. Phil Bernstein signed Your Captain, and David Mass wrote Your Lieutenant. The page was occasionally decorated with “4 get me knot” in the corners, or “Yours til the board walks.”

A particularly poignant aspect of my autograph album: I had saved the first page for my mother, but I never asked her to write anything. It was filled with the scribblings of my classmates, the autographs of my teachers, and entries from some of my relatives, but I had not asked my

mother. Three years later, she saw my junior high school autograph album lying around. She looked through it, and wrote the following on the first page that I had reserved for her:

“Sep. 7, 1945

To my son Jacob,

Best wishes to your Graduation my son. Late, well, late is my fate.

You, my dear son, came late, but thanks God you came. You came, my son.

Blessed shall be that day in December 1927. The day of days.

Dear God, may my son be blessed white. Everything that is good, fine and nice.

A very happy New Year 5705, to you my son.

Mother”

I now tear every time I read or remember it. Five and a half years after she wrote this, she was gone.

Who Was Thomas Knowlton?

While we were in 52, we never gave any thought to why our school was called Thomas Knowlton. It was a given. Somebody named it Thomas Knowlton so it was Thomas Knowlton. For me it was in the same category as: why is a hat called a hat? Why is my street called Fox Street? Is it named after the animal or somebody named Mr. Fox? Somebody gave names to the various high schools across the city: Stuyvesant, Morris, Monroe, Clinton, Hunter, Washington Irving, Gompers, Bronx High School of Science and Brooklyn Tech. The last two made sense. It said, “I am a science school” and “I am a technical school.” There was also a High School of Aviation Trades. Most of these schools were built and named in the 20’s or early 30’s. Perhaps somebody at the Board of Education had the responsibility for coming up with the names. When I thought about it, which was seldom, I divided the schools into three parts: the no-name schools like Science and Tech; the known-name schools like Stuyvesant and Monroe and Clinton; and the unknown-name schools like Morris and Hunter, and of course, Thomas Knowlton.

Although we went to a school named after him, we never knew who Thomas Knowlton was. I believe I once asked a teacher, and was told that he fought in the Revolutionary War, but he wasn’t sure. Thanks to Wikipedia, I just learned that Thomas Knowlton was born in Boxford MA in 1740, his family moved to Ashford CT when he was 8, he fought in the French and Indian War when he was 15, and as a result of his leadership in the Battle of Bunker Hill, was made an officer. He organized a group of spies called the Knowlton Rangers, in August 1776 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and was killed in the Battle of Harlem Heights in September 1776. It would have been nice to have known this when we went to Knowlton.

I mentioned Gompers High School, which was in our neighborhood. I was very proud of the fact that a high school was named after a labor leader, and a Jewish labor leader at that. Its full name was Samuel Gompers Vocational High School. Being a vocational high school diminished it in my eyes, but it seemed logical to name a vocational high school after the former president of the American Federation of Labor. No one I knew went there.

Girls

For some reason, we never questioned that junior high school should be a single sex institution. (52 became co-ed in 1962.) We said goodbye to girls as classmates at the end of sixth grade, just as we were beginning to be aware of them. During that last year of elementary school, I decided that I loved both Phyllis Flyer and Rita Feit. I suspect that they had no idea how I felt about them, though one day I went with a friend to the courtyard of Phyllis' apartment house and shouted, "Phyllis, I love you!" and ran away.

All those feelings were put on hold for the next few years. I suspect that for the same reason Orthodox synagogues separate men and women, the New York City school system separated boys and girls in junior high school (and even in some high schools.) They are very distracting. They might cause your mind to wander. So I conformed. I didn't think about girls, though I sort of liked Sallie Mae, and there was Bea, in my Arbeter Ring Shule, who sort of interested me. Thinking back to those years, it seemed that the only kids in my neighborhood were boys. Could I have been so oblivious? Wouldn't there have been an equal number of boys and girls, biologically? Why wasn't I aware of them? As far as I can remember, there was one kid who had a younger sister, and another who had an older sister, and that was it. (I didn't know at the time that Bob Epstein had three older sisters.)

Girls were absent from my world during junior high. That is not to say that I was unaware that there was an opposite sex, and that they aroused some strange feeling in me. I believe my life would have been different if junior high had been co-ed, if I had learned that girls were very much like me and my friends, and that we could be friends. The chasm that junior high created was widened by high school. I envied fellows who were at ease with girls, and was always surprised when some of my junior high classmates mentioned that they had girl friends.

Sex had begun to raise its lovely, tousled head, as someone said. By the last year of junior high, dirty books and pictures made the rounds, as well as dirty jokes. One of our teachers was referred to as "the pirate." Why the pirate, you ask. Because she had a sunken chest! She was also called "Titless Lees." How cruel, and how dumb! The two books that I remember being circulated were Fanny Hill and God's Little Acre. Not terribly dirty, and pretty good writing.

Not only were there no girls to distract us, there was only one teacher among the entire faculty who was young and attractive: R. Sybil Haver. I would have thought by the law of averages, there would have been more. But it was the end of the depression, and teachers were holding on to their jobs for dear life. There was very little turnover. Few young teachers were being hired.

A final observation: In my 2 ½ years in junior high (and for that matter in high school and college) I never met a homosexual. They must have been well closeted in the 40s. We knew they existed, but we thought they were confined to Greenwich Village. If we wanted to make fun of someone, especially someone who was not macho, we would yell, "homo!" and speak in a falsetto. My Puerto Rican friends labeled the individual "maricon." We would also accompany the designation with a gesture--either a limp wrist or a pinky along the eye brow. The closest anyone came to having his sexual preference questioned in 52 was Norman Perlmutter. He was blonde and pudgy, and played Buttercup in our production of HMS Pinafore, wearing a dress. That really took courage. And he wasn't gay.

Clubs

Time was set aside each week for us to attend a “club” of our choice. Thanks to the “Club News” section of the Knowlton Herald, I learned the names of the clubs and that the time set aside was 2:15 every Thursday. Most of the clubs were extensions of the curriculum, or related activities: French Club, Glee Club, P.T. Club, Debating Club, Clay Club, Soap Sculpture Club, Cartoon Club, Sheet Metal Club etc. We didn’t stay with the same club each term. I was in the Debating Club one term and possibly the Stamp Club or the Garden Club another term. I don’t know if we took it very seriously. The club time slot provided the Glee Club and Orchestra with the opportunity to practice, and for the members of the Traffic Squad, the Staircase Squad and the GO to meet.

I was always puzzled by what the GO (General Organization) did. It was supposed to be something like a Student Council, where elected representatives from each class, met and deliberated. But about what? It was the “teacher’advisor” who ran the show. I always joined the GO (dues were 25 cents), and I have my GO buttons from all my five terms. If I had read the GO Club entries in the Knowlton Herald, it would have confirmed my suspicion: “We meet in 506, and Mr. Lichtman is the head of the GO Club. When we are seated, we wait for Mr. Lichtman to call off classes, to get the money that we have received the previous week...Out of the money, the graduates will receive the Service pins, Knowlton “K,” the carnations and many other things...Through the hard work of Mr. Lichtman and the kindness of Mr. Raben, we were able to see a baseball game.” A troubling introduction to democracy at work. Yet I always wore my GO button, which may have led to my interest in political buttons.

Perhaps it was my involvement with the Garden Club that led me to join the school’s Victory Garden over the summer. Across the street from the school was a garden plot, and we prepared the ground during the spring, and tended to the garden during the summer. We harvested our “crop” before school started in the fall. I worked in our Victory Garden for two summers. (The summer of 1942, after I graduated, was devoted to looking for a summer job.) I believe the N.Y. Herald Tribune partnered with the Board of Education to encourage school Victory Gardens. They held an annual fair where students displayed the result of their labors, and prizes were awarded. We may not have won a prize, but all of us who worked in the garden were awarded certificates. And we were able to bring home the food we grew. In addition to the more common vegetables, we grew stuff I had never heard of. My favorite was kol rabi. It was years later that I realized that my friends Bob Epstein and Mel Schulman were also involved with the Victory Garden. We must have been solitary gardeners.

My interest in growing things preceded my working in 52’s garden, but it was encouraged by the school. We were sold seeds every spring that were packaged by the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. The packets sold for a few cents, and contained both vegetable and flower seeds. I would get cheese boxes from the grocery store, fill them with soil that I would dig out of the empty lots near the East River, put the seeds in the soil, and place the boxes on my fire escape. I grew asters, marigolds, morning glories and string beans. Again, I owe a debt of gratitude to JHS 52.

Conclusion

I have enjoyed reliving those years, and treasure the friendships I have made at junior high school 52. They have become my closest friends, which is another story. For some time, I have been aware that educators consider the junior high school-middle school years the most difficult to teach. I don't believe my teachers felt that, but times were certainly different in the 1930s-'40s. JHS 52 had children of immigrant parents. Learning was the passport to success. We wanted to do well. We may have come from families that questioned the economic system, but we were taught to respect our teachers, and that the knowledge they were imparting will be the tools we would need to make a better world. Thank you Thomas Knowlton Junior High School.

Finally, I am a sucker for reunions. When I learn about a reunion—from high school or college—if I can get there, I will. Of course, it usually is a disappointment. As far as I know, there has never been a junior high school reunion of the class of '52's class of 1942. I am toying with the thought that since June 2012 will be the 70th Anniversary of our graduation, a reunion would be a great idea. I hope Bob Epstein, Alex Roth, Milton Greenwald and Bert Seigelstein might indulge me. We could expand it to include all the 52 graduates in the classes of 1941, and 1943. We will be in our mid-80s. Why not? We just have to get the word out.

12-16-11