

## # 2 NURSERY SCHOOL DAYS

When I was about five years old, my mother “enrolled” me in the Isaac Gerson Foundation Hebrew Day Nursery. The nursery was in a brownstone house on Beck Street off 156<sup>th</sup> St., between the large corner building, Juvenile House, (or Juvie, a Jewish “settlement house” which later became a Police Athletic League facility) and the brownstone owned by my cousin Louis’ wife’s family at 722 Beck St. I do not remember if my mother and I were still living at 566 Beck Street or if we had moved to Fox Street. I do remember that Beck Street between 156 St. and Avenue St. John, was tree-lined and had private homes, rather than apartment houses.

I have only a vague memory of my time at the nursery. Initially, my mother brought me there in the morning and picked me up in the afternoon. I do not remember attending kindergarten classes at PS 62. It is possible that I made my way from my first grade class to the nursery at 3 pm and my mother picked me up at the end of the day. I must have left the nursery at the completion of first grade or second grade.

The nursery school teacher was Miss Jean. I have no memory of any of the other children. However, I learned many years later that my friend Sol Rauch was also in the nursery. We might have been in the same group, played the same games, and took naps at the same time. Were we in one big room, or were there separate rooms for different age groups? Were there tables where children could draw and play games? I have no idea. The only memory I have of the nursery is the back yard, and I have a vision of myself standing there alone and cold.

I have wondered who Isaac Gerson was, but was unable to find anything from a Google search. Undoubtedly, a minor Jewish philanthropist who sought to help poor little Jewish boys and girls. My mother was remarkably resourceful.

The early thirties were very difficult years for my mother. My father had died in June 1931, and she was struggling to survive the depression with no income and no savings. Six years earlier, when times were good, my parents had moved from Manhattan to a four room apartment in 566 Beck Street in the Bronx. I was born two years later in Hunts Point Hospital on Kelly Street, a couple blocks away, in December 1927.

My mother saw to it that I received everything a baby needed. She must have read the Yiddish equivalent of Dr. Benjamin Spock, and for my first three years, I was hovered over and well provided for. I was an only child, born 11 years after my parents’ marriage.

Among my mother’s books and papers, I found an expensive, hard-bound, glossy papered book entitled “Baby’s Life” in which the parents are supposed to keep a record of the baby’s birth and progress. These books are still gifts for new parents. My mother had written the date of birth: the eighteenth of December 1927, weight seven pounds, and had my father sign his name along with the doctor, Louis M. Kammal. The “Clergyman” who bestowed the “sacrament” which my mother must have made the equivalent of the

Mohel was Rev. S. Libsohn. And the Baby's Age and Weight are recorded as: 1 month—9 pounds, 2 months—10 pounds, 11 ounces, 3 months—12 pounds, 4 months—15 pounds, 6 months—20 pounds, 7 months—22 pounds. The baby's first outing was January 7, 1928, and the baby's first word was "ta" on July 30, 1928. The baby's first tooth was discovered on August 4, 1928. There were no more entries until my mother had me write about my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, and three years later about my Bar Mitzvah.

The neighborhood photography studio was a very popular place in the '20's and '30's when not very many people had their own cameras. I have studio pictures of me as an infant, at six months and then at one, two, three and four years. I was surprised to see the four year photographs, realizing that my father had died six months before and there was no income.

It must have been because she tried to find work and had to make some provision for me, that she found the day nursery. My mother had worked as a "finisher"—the worker in a women's coat and suit factory who did the hand sewing on the garments. But it was the depression and there was no work. She then tried buying and selling second hand clothing. I have no first hand knowledge of this, nor did my mother tell me about her effort to enter this business, but I found business cards in our house with her name and address indicating that she is a buyer of used clothing. (Some years before, she had printed cards with her name, Mrs. C. Schlitt, address and phone number, and on the reverse side, her name and "of H. Goldstein, 6 Rue Victor Letalle, Paris." This was in 1926 when her life was good and she went to Paris to visit her sister and brother-in-law and their family.) Maybe this is where my fascination with business cards originated. When I was in high school. I carried playing cards and would present one with a flourish, announcing "my card, sir." I made sure to retrieve it since I didn't want to break up the deck. But I digress.

I have a vague memory of having come home from school, most likely first grade, and my mother was not home. I guess I then just hung out. Perhaps I had been told to go to the nursery and wasn't aware. Apparently, my mother went to the nursery to pick me up, and then she must have looked for me everywhere until we finally found each other. This may have resulted in my getting a key to the apartment. The term for young children like me who are entrusted with the house key because no parent is home is "latch key kids." I never thought of myself as a latch key kid. In fact, it gave a youngster a feeling of importance to have his own house key. Unfortunately, I suspect I lost the key frequently. (That is why so many kids wore it around their necks on a ribbon.)