

2. TOO YOUNG FOR SCHOOL, MONTREAL 1917

My earliest memory was of a fire that broke out somewhere below our third floor apartment when I was about three years old, and Gertie and I had to be evacuated, initially to our back porch. A neighbor's apartment was about two feet away, and I was passed from the one balcony to the other. Nothing notable happened, and soon I was passed back.

Then we moved to Melrose Avenue in Notre Dame de Grace, and after a short time there to 3454 Addington Avenue in which I lived between ages 6 and 23.

Our Robert and his Nazrat visited Montreal in 2002, and saw the house from the outside--it was a rainy night and too late to call on the present occupants. But his report that he had seen the outside stimulated my memories. Only after my time was oil heating installed.

The house did have a spacious back yard, and when I was about 8 years old I planted a vegetable garden. In doing so I had technical advice from a retired neighbour. Mr. Young, and the outcome was a fairly impressive supply of vegetables for the summer months.

On one occasion when I was alone in the house I was trying an experiment on the gas stove, and managed to ignite some oil and the fire shot up dangerously high. Alarmed, I tried pouring water, and now the flames shot right up to the ceiling. I am not sure just how close I came to setting the house afire, but luckily I tried nothing more and the fire died down.

The dark uncultivated area under the back porch provided an opportunity for doing things that the grassy lawn in the sun did not. I was joined by other little devils in the neighborhood and we competed in the making of mud-pies. There was plenty of dirt, but no water. Until some creative spirit thought of peeing on the dirt. I am sure there was no artistic value in the varied mud pies we made, but it sure was fun.

Making bows and arrows and then competing in target practice was good sport; we usually did the necessary cutting with a vegetable knife borrowed from the kitchen. I remember a slightly older boy named Tony who on one occasion hit the target when I didn't. "Just luck," I commented. "No" he replied, "I was aiming at the target so luck couldn't come into it." On that particular trial he had unambiguously won. That that success might occur only once in ten times had nothing to do with the matter. Was he a better marksman than I was? Since then I have thought about the question of whether the team that wins a particular game or series of games is really the better team--i.e. will it win a majority of games over the long pull? A very difficult question to answer, and best not raised if one wants a straightforward answer to the question who wins the tournament.

When a little older I had the idea of making a propeller by cutting and bending a piece of tin (obtained as a scrap on a local construction site), then hammering two phonograph needles (now obsolete as a way of reproducing sound but invaluable for my purpose because they were like nails that had no head) into the end of a spool through which a stick could be placed, and with a piece of string twirling the spool so that the propeller would fly off straight upwards. That was in theory. Unfortunately the system I constructed was not well balanced and on one occasion it came off sideways at considerable speed, and cut my hand right down to the bone. The scar remains to this day. I hastened to treat it with what I knew of such things, hoping it would not become infected and draw the attention of my mother.

In those days children--certainly myself--had very few or no commercial toys, and so we were challenged to make our own toys, with all the stimulation and risk involved. The only commercial toy I ever had was a top, spun with a string. When vigorously thrown it would gyrate for several minutes, until friction slowed it to the point where it fall over. . Commercial toys today appeal to children, who put pressure on their parents, so middle-class homes have a riot of toys. . When we became parents we were pinched for money and had to improvise, but plasticine for modeling was inexpensive. And my most successful effort along this line was getting a nearby lumber mill to saw up some 1-inch planks to my design, and when they were delivered I nailed them together to make blocks, perhaps 8 by 8 inches and 3 inches deep. I couldn't have spent a Saturday afternoon better than on that construction project; Barby and Rob were delighted with their blocks and used them for many months, putting up buildings of imaginative architectural form and uncertain engineering that they proudly showed us.

One of the things our gang of six-year old boys in the neighborhood did was to burn away the dead grass in the spring. We had heard it said that this would make the new grass grow better, and besides it was fun. On one occasion the fire got out of control. We beat it furiously with our jackets but it continued to spread. A neighbor phoned the Fire Department and they put it out with an ordinary fire extinguisher. Then they got the fire reels turned round and went back to the station. My school jacket smelled of acrid smoke for weeks after. There were no rebukes but that escapade left me with a sense of guilt that remains to this day.

Herbert Symonds Elementary School, Montreal 1919-1926

At six years of age, in September 1919, I went off to school, equipped with writing pad and pencil. On the way a giant dog--taller than myself--barked furiously and terrified me. A girl only slightly taller than myself and evidently braver, said something like "It's all right, little boy," rescued me and conducted me to the school building.

My first days in school were miserable. I was seated in the back of the class, and the teacher at the front as well as the blackboard on which she wrote was a blur. Only after several months did my parents grasp that I was very near-sighted and had me fitted with glasses.

But an even more trivial circumstance interfered with my schooling on that first day. My father had given me a stubby pencil as I went out the door on the way to school. When the time came for the writing lesson my pencil was nowhere to be found. I may have lost it on the way to school or in the schoolyard. It could have been right there on the floor, and I was too short-sighted to see it. I was too shy to ask the teacher if she would lend me a pencil, and just suffered, pretending to be writing.

A trivial experience but it affected my entire subsequent life. To this day our house is full of pencils. And the fear of loss extends to other things, flashlights, rubber bands, CD players. On each of these objects I have followed a "saturation policy", in which I can reach out my hand wherever I am in the house and find a needed pencil or flashlight.

I used to rank number 30 or 31 in a 32-pupil class. That was due to my paying little attention to the class work and never getting the idea of doing homework. After school I was too busy playing football on a scratch team in a vacant lot.

In those days before electronic controls, a student would be selected from about Grade 4, to press the button that would ring the bells for the start of classes, for recess, and for dismissal. It was a minor honor to be selected for this task. When the bell went off too early by one hour, the principal summoned me into his office, and said "I thought you said you could read the time." I could read the time, but was so overwhelmed by the weight of responsibility and so nervous that I misread the clock. I had no defense for this delinquency and was summarily dismissed from my commanding post at the desk from which the bells were controlled.

Growing up Jewish, but not too Jewish, Montreal 1920s

In the part of Montreal where we lived there were two places of Jewish worship. One was the liberal Temple E-manuel, the other the Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue, with stricter observance of the rules. Judaism was pretty watered down at the Temple to which we belonged and to which my father paid a minimal amount each year so that we children could get some idea of what it means to be a Jew. We attended services on Friday evening and the High Holidays (they dragged painfully), and went to Sunday school (quite interesting, almost inspired, by such excellent teachers as David Lewis and Abraham Edel who later become well-known, the first in Ontario politics, the second in the academy). My father hired an old Rabbi with a scraggly beard to give me a once weekly lesson in Hebrew, but either he was a poor teacher or I was a poor student--probably both--and today I can't even read the Hebrew characters, let alone translate the words.

Seen in retrospect, their motives for sending us to the Temple were not simple. Partly they wanted us to know we were Jewish. But it also happened that the Temple, located in Westmount, had a wealthy congregation. The young people I would meet there would be of good (i.e. well-off, not necessarily virtuous) families. My parents could never forget that someday I was going to get married and continue the Keyfitz line and they wanted me to have the right kind of friends, including nubile maidens, from among whom to choose,.

Our attitude to Jewishness came out clearly on the question of circumcision when our son Rob was born. We would not have dreamt of letting him grow up uncircumcised, but equally we would not have dreamt of having it done by a mohel; it was done in the hospital by a regular physician, The local Rabbi phoned to put pressure on me, but he got nowhere.

At home Yiddish was spoken by our parents to one another, but never to us children nor by us. We were encouraged to speak English, to read English, to write English to think English, --I remember my father giving me a fountain pen and me using it to write a newspaper-type article. He wanted us above all to act like native members of the Canadian English-speaking community.

There was little looking back to Eastern Europe, never any reference to life there. My father's only contact was with an older brother, my Uncle Moses. My grandfather with his wife and children left about the beginning of the 20th century except that Moses, then probably about 30 years of age and already established as a medical doctor, did not want to leave his practice. On one occasion my father and his brothers raised the money to treat Uncle Moses to a trip to Canada, and he spent about a month in Montreal and Toronto. Heaven knows what since happened to him or to his children--after my father died we had no further contact.

The Temple had ups and downs in the Rabbis chosen to lead the services and to give the Friday evening sermon. There was the highly respected Rabbi Merritt; when he left to take a post at an even richer congregation in the U.S., we had an interregnum, when a lawyer, Nathan Gordon, led the services and guided the Temple. And then we had Rabbi Stern who was still there when our daughter Barbara came to be married.

One of the themes of all sermons was morality, especially morality in business. Judaism has always laid stress on moral dealings. The business men who made up a large part of the congregation liked to have a Rabbi who would thunder against crooked dealings in business. By listening to these exhortations once a week they seemed to be absolved from offenses committed the rest of the week. At least this was the impression that I gained as a boy sent by his parents to attend Friday evening prayers.

Sunday School--Abraham Edel, David Lewis and Boy Scouting, Montreal 1925-30

I attended Sunday School between ages 12 and 17 at Temple E-Manuel. These activities of the Temple aimed at informing us on Judaism and getting us to identify with it. We young people were fortunate in the public spirited adults who undertook to instruct and lead us.

David Lewis was a student at the McGill Law School in my time as his pupil at Sunday School. He went on to become the head of the New Democratic Party of Ontario, a well-known political figure, with very high standing in liberal circles.

Abe Edel studied philosophy at McGill and then went to New York to take a Ph. D., and ultimately attained a professorship in ethics at the University of Pennsylvania, of which he is now Emeritus. He is still alive, as no other of my teachers is, and I have been in touch with him by phone.

On June 20, 1938, the trustees of the City Colleges of New York instituted democratic rule, making a big change in higher education. Abraham Edel was an active participant in the movement that instituted this change.

I was also a member of the Boy Scout troop at Temple E-Manuel led by a public spirited pharmacist named Ginsberg.

The Boy Scout movement was founded in Britain by Lt. Gen. Robert Baden-Powell and spread rapidly world-wide as parents on all continents saw the advantage of getting their sons off the streets and subject to some semi-military discipline for at least a few hours of each week. I persuaded my father to put up the few dollars needed to attire a boy scout in a uniform with some South African and some RCMP trappings. My mother went down with me to where the uniform was sold, and bought me the hat with four creases, the prescribed shirt, a large square colored scarf that could be knotted as a tie and the characteristic dark blue shorts. Then I was ready for the initiation ceremony; and the weekly meetings.

But scouting is more than discipline and summer camp. It includes learning some fundamental matters that are not taught at school. We had to learn how to make a fire safely in the woods, how to cook a simple meal, how to sew on a button, and a dozen other survivor skills. When one had mastered each of these to the prescribed standard, one was awarded a badge that served to dress up the uniform as medals do a soldier's, and I was proud to have three badges--cooking awarded for making an edible dish of steak and potatoes, etc. Some of my fellow scouts had as many as a dozen badges.

YMCA Summer Camp, Laurentian Mountains 1927-28

When I was in second year of high school I managed to persuade my father to pony up the cost of two weeks in summer camp. (As I recall it was about \$8 a week, plus transport to the site of the camp, deep in the woods some 50 miles north of Montreal.)

Conditions were primitive, partly made so deliberately, partly to save expense. We lived in tents, ate our meals at fixed hours in a rough wooden pavilion. If you slept in, you missed your breakfast. The food was nourishing but hardly haute cuisine. Nor was it served with elegance. We sat on benches, that ran down both sides of long tables and the baked beans or the meat and potatoes or the spaghetti and meat balls would be placed by the kitchen help at the end of a long table, and then passed down the table by each of us as we filled our plates.

After dark we might have a singsong, with one of the counselors choosing the songs and leading the singing. Another night it might be star-gazing, when we would stretch out on our backs in a clearing in the woods and a counselor would identify the constellations with a flashlight that threw a narrow beam into the sky. Another time we might have a daylong hike through the woods, with a counselor to ensure we didn't get lost and to point out strange animals, birds and plants that we might encounter.

Much of our time was free--to go walking or canoeing or swimming as we chose. Another boy and I more than once took one of the canoes and explored the waters that were within the very extensive camp property. There were two lakes, each about a quarter mile in length, and a neck of land, perhaps a hundred feet wide, lay between them, referred to as the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Isthmus of Panama respectively. More than once we did the portage between the two lakes.

Camp life had its minor accidents. On one occasion I was paddling vigorously and my finger caught a sliver on the side of the canoe. It was driven deep under the nail of the third finger of my left hand. I showed it to the first counselor I met (they all knew some first aid, and his prescription was to go to the camp cook, ask for a cup of hot water, as hot as I could stand, and soak the affected finger. I did and sooner or later the sliver came out and the incident was forgotten--except for the fingernail which is somewhat deformed to this day, most of 80 years later.

A part of the deal with my father was my promising to write a letter home every day. I got the stationery and the 2-cent stamps from the camp store. When I came to leave I was told that I owed 28 cents, and that I did not have. Left After considerable discussion with the camp authorities it was settled that I would mail back those stamps from home, which I did.

All in all, camp was a great experience that I look back to with pleasure. For a city boy the change of scene was especially enjoyable. A sense of fair play was nurtured, as was the camaraderie with boys from different cities and different stations of life. I could never understand why neither my children nor my grandchildren wanted it.

Each summer my mother and we children lived for a month or so in a rented cabin on a Laurentian lake, while my father came out on weekends. In one place it was my daily duty to row half a mile to the village post office and pick up the family's mail. It was never the same location twice-I remember in particular St. Margaret, Val Morin, Trout Lake, and Morin Heights. The nearest we came to a similar experience for the next generation was buying a property near Cantley on the Gatineau River some 20 miles from Ottawa, where we lived for three or four summers and I and later Barbara commuted each morning and evening to jobs in the west end of Ottawa.

West Hill High School, Montreal 1926-1930

I attended West Hill High, about a mile along Sherbrooke Street in a westerly direction from our home on Addington Avenue. Taking a street car was unthinkable as was having lunch anywhere but at home--so I walked the 4 miles each day. I liked walking, and sometimes did 15 miles or more on a weekend.

Our history teacher was Miss Simpson, thin, tall and dried-out, but very well informed. She stood erect at the front of the class and ground her way through the history of Rome, or Britain, or Canada. She must have thought of herself as lecturing in an amphitheater of a great university.

Miss Simpson was Canadian, as was Mr. Wilson, our French teacher, but nearly all our other teachers were Scottish, Highland or Lowland. The Scottish respect for education showed itself in their many and excellent colleges built in unlikely places. It was a poor country, largely engaged in farming, and the colleges (I am told) would close up in plowing and harvesting seasons. Its thirst for knowledge far exceeded its capacity to place graduates in jobs at home, and they were willing to face the cold and snow of Canada rather than remain unemployed. To our great good fortune! I am sure that these teachers had an important part not only in instructing me, but in fashioning whatever is good about my character.

Latin was taught by Mr. Somerville, from the lowlands. His shape contrasted with that of Miss Simpson, in that he was medium height with a very generous midriff.

Mr. Somerville was somewhat deaf, and sensitive as deaf people tend to be. On one occasion a smart aleck student ordered to recite from the Aeneid, moved his lips and uttered no sound. Mr.

Somerville, a man who could control himself in the face of most student pranks, found this too much and ordered up the strap.

Strapping (known among us as the biffs) was usual and was administered by the teacher with a certain flourish, in the corridor, out of sight of the class. If someone had committed a crime, such as talking back to a teacher, he would be given a brief trial in the Principal's office, and sentenced to a certain number of strokes. The name of the culprit, the offense, and the sentence would be formally registered in a special book. That was indeed a disgrace in the eyes of parents, but no disgrace at all among the boys. They would gather round at the first opportunity and examine the hands of the culprit, commenting on the extent of the damage. I cannot report on the matter; I am ashamed to say that I never had the biffs.

Mr. Somerville, the best teacher I ever had, must have been identified as having administrative talent, since he was promoted out of West Hill High and given a senior post with the Protestant Board of School Commissioners.

And then there was Mr. Hodgson, a very sensitive Englishman, who sought the affection of his class. He didn't know Canadian boys. One Friday afternoon he announced that the following day there would be a hike, and anyone who wanted to come to the corner of Girouard and Monkland at the appointed hour was welcome. I was the only one who showed, and we agreed that the hike was off.

Mr. Hodgson had some literary aspirations--he published an historical novel of New France. But somehow he never got onto the same wave length as Canadian students. In the end he did catch the attention and sympathy of the class--he hanged himself in the toilet of a railway train. I have no idea what part we boys had in driving him to this.

I had many associations during those years. One that I especially valued was with Betty Guy. In the four classrooms (two of boys and two of girls) that constituted Grade 11 at West Hill High School she always came out first, and I second. When we graduated we both attended McGill, and we both walked down to the University each morning. I would go south a few houses to the corner of Addington and Sherbrooke, then turn east which was left.

Betty lived on Sherbrooke further west, and she also walked, so we often met and went the two miles together. (It never occurred to me that her happening to come by just as I rounded the corner could be more than coincidence.) I have forgotten what we talked about, but it was certainly not my affection for her--that my shyness kept hidden. Though I was in no position to get married, I had such a thought often.

Many years later, when we both already had grown up children, I got in touch with Betty. In a telephone conversation I told her about my high school affection for her. She said "Why didn't you say so then?" There was no rancor in her voice.

Stuart Wilson didn't get the best grades, but was surely the smartest student in my high school class and he lived near me so we often walked together west along Sherbrooke Street. Stuart discoursed on Dickens, and I on the essays of T.B. Macaulay. What was great about those walks was that we had discovered literature, as much from one another as in the classroom. But his talent was mostly along visual lines, and he planned on becoming an architect, the profession of his father.

We graduated high school and went to college, he in architecture and I in mathematics. But one bright Sunday morning in winter, two years into our college courses, he rang our door bell, and asked me to go for a walk. Once out of earshot of our house he started the conversation abruptly--"Keyfitz" he said (we had the English schoolboy style of calling one another by surname) "I am married". While I was trying to take this in he explained that he and a waitress named Margaret had had intimacies, and that Margaret was pregnant. He would have to quit McGill right away, in the middle of his second year in architecture, and go to work. That was indeed an honorable solution, since he really had no respect and little love for Margaret. I commented lamely that that was a shame, he had been headed for a wonderful career.

Margaret was certainly not the wife for him and they separated after a few years. What made the outcome of his escapade truly tragic was that young Tony, the son of Margaret and Stuart, got into bad company, took to drugs, and died in his 40s. Stuart and Tony had spent too little of their lives together, and it was a terrible blow.

At the earliest opportunity but well into adult life, Stuart got an architecture degree, but never had a proper professional career, taking a not very interesting post in the Department of Architecture at McGill. I used to call Stuart each time I passed through Montreal over the subsequent years, and often went out to his house where he lived alone. He seemed increasingly demoralized. The last time I called he didn't want me to come over--he was sorry but he was in poor form, terribly discouraged, and he said we had nothing to talk about. I thought I could cheer him, but he insisted that meeting me would be more than he could handle.

I called the Department of Architecture at McGill recently and asked for him and was told that he died in 1992.

The formal end of my high school career was a graduation ceremony on a spring evening of 1930. Betty read the Valedictory, I read the Class Prophecy. The former was expected to be solemn, the latter funny. Only one prophecy I remember-Eugene Rosenberg whose father was a

dentist, and I said that he would be a dentist. I said that he invited me into his drawing room. Not very funny, but typical, and sufficient to draw a certain polite tittering from pupils and parents attending.

In winding up my story of West Hill High, I sadly report that soon after I graduated it was consolidated into another school, and so lost both its name and its premises. It makes me feel an orphan to think that my alma mater has disappeared without a trace.

Weekend escapades, Tramping in the Laurentians 1928-30

Escaping from city schoolboy existence to a wholly different world that of the homeless tramp, provided a taste of freedom in my adolescence. True we had no money, but then one really didn't need money. Not beyond the cost of street car fare to where the highway started, plus the cost of very rudimentary victuals. With a friend, Max Fargeon or Harold Rosenstein, I would stand by the edge of the road and signal a request for a lift. It was never more than five or ten minutes before a car pulled up, the driver said where he was going, and if that was acceptable to us we climbed into his car.

The speed limit was about 40 miles an hour along those twisting roads, mostly, but by no means all, asphalt. Usually after an hour and a half of amiable conversation as we drove, we arrived, said "Many thanks!" and let ourselves out. The social courtesies of just one generation earlier, when rural traffic consisted of farmers in horse-drawn vehicles taking produce to market, and anyone who just passed by a pedestrian at the side of the road without asking where he was going would be just a curmudgeon, in somewhat diluted form still survived at the end of the first quarter of the 20th century. .

When we got to Sainte Agathe there was a hotel, and a certain amount of activity in its courtyard. That was a world utterly beyond our participation but we enjoyed it as spectacle. I remember the time when the young men summering there would greet one another by bashing in his straw hat and then having his own bashed in. Sometimes there was resistance, and a kind of duel was engaged-just as their aristocratic ancestors might have done with rapiers three centuries back. That was the way the young blades, the children of the rich, amused themselves in the 1920s.

After that we might set out walking to one of the numerous uninhabited lakes in the area, perhaps make a fire and cooking ourselves toast or a sausage on the shore. Perhaps borrow a boat in exchange for the service of bailing out the rain water that had fallen the previous night. On occasion we were well enough off to rent bicycles. I had never in my life ridden a bicycle, but did not let on, and just climbed aboard and set off behind Mac Fargeon. I was surprised at the ease with which I could start off, but equally surprised by how tired my legs were after a very few miles.

When night fell and we had no light of any kind the only thing to do was sleep. In warm dry weather just lying down in the deep grass of a field by the side of the road was good enough. Otherwise we sought shelter, perhaps a vacant house or barn. On one occasion our wanderings a considerable distance from a main road brought us into a little isolated colony of half a dozen small wooden houses occupied by farmers, recent immigrants from Poland. Anyone who had to make a living by farming that stony soil would be poor indeed. But you couldn't beat them for hospitality. They invited us for dinner and to spend the night, even providing beds.

Once when I was up by myself I was walking along a dusty road, and a car passed. I didn't see who was driving, but in the back seat was a young lady waving vigorously until the car was out of sight. Presumably someone in my class at school, but I never did find out. That was my only contact with the opposite sex on all my excursions.

And finally we had had enough and wanted to go back. Usually the same hitchhiking served as the means of travel. But once we did better. We were near a railway shunting yard, and found a train that was preparing to return to Montreal. We climbed up on the rungs on the side of the engine, and took seats on the top where there were also rungs to sit on and to hold. What we failed to count on was that the smoke, going straight up when the engine was still, would be swept back when it got into motion and we were just behind the engine. It burned soft coal, and we were covered with it – hands, face, and clothing. Arriving home at 3454 Addington Avenue on that occasion I managed to get into the bathroom and close the door without being detected, and stayed there a long time, vigorously scrubbing that smoke out of my face and hands.

I can report that we did some business at one point in these trips. Land was selling for a dollar an acre in the more isolated areas to which we traveled and we decided to buy 100 acres. The city job prospects seemed so bad that we might well want to live on our own land and gain our living by farming its fields, however stony. During the Depression many people thought this way, and one whom we knew, Fred Wakerell, actually put it into effect, with the help of his wife and large family constructing a small house just outside of Ottawa. Fargeon did have a job, and was able to put down \$50 on his account and \$50 on mine. I was to repay him when I got the money. In fact by the time I had the money we had lost interest in the project and Fargeon liquidated our holding.

How many times in all did we get away from home this way in the course of three summers? If I had to guess I would say 25 or 30 times. What was the point of it? After all we came from middle-class homes with three meals a day supplied, with beds and regularly washed sheets on which to sleep, with a roof that kept out the rain. Why did we leave it all as we broke away from civilization for two or three days at a time? As I see it now 75 years later we welcomed the irregular eating, the rough or non-existent accommodation, and the exposure to cold and wet.

They symbolized our freedom, the goal of people in all ages. Freedom was what our escapades were all about.

