

EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS
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I have often wondered why I am what I am, why my emotions, ambitions, drives, goals, my relations to others, my sympathy for underdogs. I have been interviewed: I am on an oral history cassette in my union's archives at the University of Pittsburgh because I was research director of the United Electrical Workers for 39 years. I was interviewed on my labor background by a former acting dean of the New School over radio station WBAI. Just two months ago I was the target of a mass interview by a Queens College class of 25 people in a course of labor studies who wondered how I had gotten into the field and what job prospects there were for them .

IN each case questions were posed to me by others to meet their objectives. My answers , as I now reflect on them, were self-serving, subconsciously phrased to build up my accomplishments. But I look at this class on autobiography as giving me an opportunity, if I thrust aside my ego ,to look into my past to search out,if I can, what made me what I am.

My mind retains only fragments of my earliest childhood, but vividly remembered fragments. It is night-time and I am lying in bed in a railroad flat right next to the kitchen. My parents believing I am asleep are wrestling with the problem of where to find the money to tide the family over until the seasonal layoff is over; my father an instructor in Poland works as a tailor in this country. I hear the worry in their voices and I worry along with them.

I am now four and one half years old and again I have been put to sleep, but this time on a makeshift bed on the kitchen table. I hear a babble of excited voices and the bright overhead light is turned on. I look into my erstwhile bedroom and I see someone holding a pink doll upside down by the ankle , slapping its backside and the doll responding with a loud cry. My father tells me I now have a brother. I think to myself, how large and well-formed and beautiful he looks. Now, over six decades later, I wonder if those were really my thoughts, and it seems to me that whenever I thought of my brother's birth that was the way I felt.

I am now five years old and it is my first day in the first grade, 1a as we called it at the time. I see five rows with eight children in each row. We are all sitting up straight, with our heads arched back and our fists tightly clinched on the desks before us, hoping to please our teacher. The teacher who looked like my mother had just told us that if we did not behave she would spank us, and had just put a child on her lap and spanked him for no reason that I could see. My mother, incidentally, would never ever hit anyone of her five children.

What even made the situation more unendurable for me was that the

teacher told us there was to be no chewing in class and I had a wad of gum in my mouth. I was terrified that she would find me out and put me across her formidable lap. I surreptitiously whisked the gum out of my mouth, intending to stick it to the underside of my desk. It stuck to my fingers. I tried to take it off with my other hand and it stuck to that hand as well. As I desperately tried to remove it from one hand to another, both hands became covered with the sticky stuff. It was as if both my hands were stuck in a jar of glue. I suffered through the morning, fearing that the teacher would find me out and punish me. After what seemed to be an eternity, lunchtime came and my mother set things right.

Six more months have elapsed and I am now in 1B. This teacher seems to be nice but she has decreed that boys must wear ties. After several warnings, all boys have come dressed properly, except me. She puts me with the dummies in the last row last seat. I'm crushed. Going to school every day becomes the worst kind of humiliation. I don't know why, but I feel I must hide my disgrace from mother who is always kind and loving. I suffer the degradation for weeks. What is worse, I am taunted by my schoolmates ~~as~~ being a dummy, but serendipitously my mother overhears and is shocked. Next day I go to school wearing a flowing tie. My teacher at once takes notice and offer me my choice of seats. The first row, first seat is open but I think it is too grand for me and instead I take a first row, third seat.

As I write this about my early days in school, my memory jumps ahead some forty years when my son, Richard, was in kindergarten. Parents had been invited to see their children's activities during the day. Forty-one parents were seated around the periphery of the schoolroom observing the children, forty women and there was I, the lone male. My wife and I were both working, but I had the more flexible work schedule. In those days as I remember it men rarely attended parents' meetings. In any event as I sat with these forty women, not in the least bothered by it, Richard came over to me, took me by the hand said, "Daddy come sit with me" and took me to his desk. A wave of love pulsed through my body at the empathy such a little boy would show for what he conceived the plight of his father.