

GRADE SCHOOL MEMORIES

By Mike Harris

For some reason of which I was not aware at the time, I found myself living in New York City, on the lower east side. Living in an apartment house at 25 Avenue D. For anyone who is acquainted with the city, they know where and what I am talking about. However since I am now in a foreign country I will be more explicit. This part of the city was the true melting pot of all the immigrants who came in waves from middle and eastern Europe. Germans, Poles, Italians, Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Estonians, and Jews, who lived in all these countries. The children of these immigrants all spoke the languages of their parents fluently. They picked up some smattering of street English on the street.

Public or grade school [one and the same] started in September. I being six years old, my father enrolled me in the public school in the neighborhood. Tall, skinny, red headed, scared, with a canvas bag that had a pencil, lined pad, paper sack containing a sandwich, my father escorted me to the school entrance with the admonition "When school lets out you are to wait here and either mom or I will pick you up. You are not to go with anyone who offers to take you home, if they insist you are to run away screaming as loud as you can HELP! HELP! and try to get back into the school. Do you understand?" "Yes" I answered not knowing why, but if my father says to do something believe me I obeyed. Fortunately nothing untoward happened and my father met me when school let out. I entered the school with my canvas bag and a piece of paper with the number of the room to which I was to report. Older children met us in the hall, one of them looked at the piece of paper clutched in my hand and said, "Greeny follow me." He led me to a room and said, "Find a seat, the teacher will be here soon." I did and since all the seats in the back of the room were filled I took a seat in the second row. Soon a large tall woman walked through the door and went behind the desk. When a bell sounded, she got up to close the door and two more scared rabbits just made it in. "You are late, be here on time, find some seats and sit down." With that she closed the door. She stepped in front of the desk looked over the class and said, "This is America. We speak only English in this room. If you understood what I just said stand up next to your seat!" About half stood up the rest seeing their neighbor stand decided they had better stand too. I am sure that half had no idea why some stood but decided that is something they better do. "Fine," she said, "every body sit down," and so my introduction to the American educational system began.

The teacher, Mrs. McNut, wrote her name on the blackboard, pointed to it and said, "My name is Mrs. McNut. I am your teacher and you all will learn to speak English!" With that she put up some pictures of boy and girl children and said "Today everyone is going to learn the English word names of the parts of our bodies." With that she pointed to of the feet of the pictured children and said "feet." Everybody repeat "feet." Some who spoke a little street English said "feet." Seeing that I didn't respond, she pointed to me with her pointer, to the picture, then to my shoes and said again, "feet." I caught on and repeated "feet." She smiled and nodded. She then made each student repeat "feet." We were pretty bright kids and so when she pointed to legs and said "legs" everybody in chorus repeated "legs" and so we learned the English names for the parts of the body. We spent the whole morning drilling the names of the parts of the body. Everybody learned fast. Soon she would point someone would raise their hand, give the correct answer.

Let me describe Mrs. McNut, tall, large, a little on the heavy side, glasses on a ribbon that mostly rested on her bosom, presenting a persona of "I am the boss, you are here to learn and you will learn to speak English properly." What do you know, we learned and went home and taught our parents and they learned. Mrs. McNut a most intimidating and wonderful teacher!