

Mike Harris, Our Young Old Friend

By Dennis Payton Knight

Our young old friend, Meyer (Mike) Harris, passed away on Wednesday, June 27th, 2015, eight days shy of his 98th birthday, just two years and nine days shy of a hundred. Despite calendar evidence to the contrary, Mike died a young man.

He came to Denver in 2012 from his home in Philadelphia, to be near the family of his son, Richard. Except for a short stint of training at Lowry Airfield during World War II, he was a stranger to our town. He found stubbornly independent living at Windsor Gardens. I say stubbornly, because his independence was very important to him. Mike always made it clear he was, and would be his own master.

Mike joined the Windsor Gardens Writers Group that spring, claiming he had never before written, then proceeded to churn out essays documenting stories of living a Jewish life in America. In his three years in the writers group, he produced a hundred and ten essays. You will find all of them posted on the Writers Group website.

Mike always tried to stay within the scope of the weekly writing challenges, but he could never help being mostly autobiographical. He seemed at one point to be a little embarrassed that his memoirs were seeping out between the lines, and so he announced to us on a Monday morning in July of 2014 that he would no longer be writing about himself. Instead, he would be telling us of a fictional character he called "Roy."

"Let me introduce you to Roy," he wrote, "He is a person, very human, born in 1917 with the experiences of the people of his generation... The name Roy evolved from the Jewish word 'roiter' which translates 'red head.'" The next week Mike wrote how the stumblebum Roy had learned to dance. In the third week, Roy was in the Army and part of a photo reconnaissance unit deployed to North Africa. By the fourth week he had retired and became a school bus driver in his spare time. After that, Roy was forgotten and Mike was again unabashedly his own main character.

Several of us were privileged to attend Mike's services, conducted just two days after his death, consistent with Jewish tradition. We heard tributes paid by Edith, his daughter, and Richard, his son. As Richard admiringly said, "It is not unusual to make it to the age of 98, but Mike Harris *lived* for ninety-eight years."

They told us how much it meant to Mike to have been part of the Windsor Gardens Writers Group. They appreciated what we and our community meant to their father, and we in turn felt strongly connected to them, because they shared their dad with us for a few very good years.

Our young old friend left us on a Wednesday morning, on only his second day in the assisted living environment he had stubbornly resisted. Meyer (Mike) Harris was, to the end, his own master.