

My kindergarten teacher at P.S. 60 was Ceil Mannheimer, a strapping woman who appeared to my young eyes to be in her 50s. Miss Mannheimer (all our female teachers were "Miss," whether married or not) kept us busy cutting out construction paper and gluing it to other construction paper, drawing, and "learning our letters." She also kept the classroom constantly entertained by passing gas freely and noisily with little regard for what her young charges might think of the practice.

For first grade, I had Miss Lulu Ellingsworth, a lovely, gentle lady. My principal memory of her is that her wrinkled face, gray hair, and bird-like figure made her appear ancient to six-year-old me. After a year of learning the rudiments of the three Rs in Miss Ellingsworth's first grade, I passed from there into Miss Dacy's second grade. Miss Dacy was known around the school for three things: wearing heavy white makeup on her face, wearing a wig (it was rumored), and requiring misbehaving students to sit under her desk as punishment while she sat there teaching the rest of the class. The boys in our class had a grand time twittering and talking in whispers about what you could see looking up Miss Dacy's dress if she consigned you (as I once was consigned) to under-desk punishment. The tops of her thighs were whiter than white, I confidently reported to my friends based on that subterranean view.

The street on which my elementary school was located, Francis Street, was home to the infamous Francis Streeters. The Francis Streeters, as I've already suggested, were a gang of what my parents called "hillbillies" (families that had moved to the "big city" from Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and points south) who lived around Francis Street, Clifton Avenue, and Fulton Avenue. These kids specialized in anti-Semitic slurs and physical harassment, up to and including beating, of any Jewish kids who happened their way.

Although my own contacts with the Francis Streeters were not all that frequent (I was advised energetically and often to avoid them if at all possible, advice to which I tried to adhere),

my memories of them are vivid. One day, as I was walking to P.S. 60 by myself, I turned the corner to come face-to-face with a terrified boy running in my direction, pursued by three Francis Streeters. One of the gang held a manual can opener, the kind with a sharp metal point at the end of a wooden handle. The kid being chased was running so fast, and I was so taken by surprise, that I could not make out who he was. The pursuing Francis Streeters were so intent on running the boy down that they did not stop to check me out. I think I was too small a fish to be of much challenge or interest to them, anyway. That I did not hear afterward of anyone being grievously injured makes me think that the boy being pursued ran faster and longer than his pursuers.

At the end of second grade, a decision I didn't participate in was made about my schooling. My mother was concerned that P.S. 60 was located in such a tough neighborhood that I might come to harm, so she arranged for me to be transferred to Public School 18, located on Druid Park Drive in a distinctly better area about a mile in the other direction from my house than P.S. 60 was. I entered the third grade of P.S. 18 in Selma Meyerson's class, but a funny thing happened on the way to Miss Meyerson's. It turned out that, at that time, my oldest brother Leonard, who was then 22, was dating Miss Meyerson, an attractive woman with alluring red tresses whose nickname to her grown-up friends was Pepe. Leonard brought her home after a date one evening, and somehow I ended up sitting on her lap. Maybe she thought that having Leonard's youngest brother cuddle up to her might ingratiate herself to Len and our family. Hell, whatever the reason, I didn't mind: I was in seventh heaven. I reported this all enthusiastically to my new classmates the next time I was in school, including the fact, little-known to my classmates, that her nickname was Pepe. "Nah, you're making that up. No teacher goes into her pupils' houses. And I betcha her name ain't Pepe, either" was the kind of response my report drew from my classmates and friends. But, ah, I knew, I knew.