High School During the Depression

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

What was it like going to high school in the 1940s, when we were still in the Great Depression and war had broken out in Europe? Actually, I had nothing to complain about. Life was beautiful in the great city of New York. You couldn't help being optimistic in that great capital of capitalism, with its fantastic skyscrapers, palatial movie theaters, Broadway shows, museums, huge department stores. Also, it was a very safe city. You could ride the subway at two in the morning and not worry about being robbed or assaulted.

The New York World's Fair of 1939-40 was a spectacle one would never forget. Its bold optimism was symbolized by its famous Trylon and Perisphere. The magnificent General Motors pavilion gave us a view of the future. It was called the Futurama. We all believed in the greatness of America's future, regardless of what was happening abroad.

At age 14, my life was wrapped around going to school. I had been strongly urged by one of my junior high school teachers to apply for admission to Stuyvesant High School, a prestigious exam school in Manhattan. I passed the test, but since I lived in the Bronx, it meant taking the elevated train every day to the school located in lower Manhattan. The trains were clean and safe and young people behaved like young ladies and gentlemen.

In fact, in those days high schoolers were considered young adults, not "teenagers." High school was serious business, and so we dressed like young adults, behaved like young adults, and our teachers treated us accordingly. They weren't trying to drug us, or turn us into functional illiterates, or destroy our religious beliefs. They respected our family's values, and thus earned our respect and affection in return. Back then there were no school massacres or shootings. Schools were safe.

At Stuyvesant, academic standards were high and rigorous. We were serious about education, and there were no bullies or fights. That sort of thing was for the elementary or middle school. But even in middle school there wasn't much of it.

My favorite course was architectural drawing. I was good at it, and my teacher was very encouraging. I had thought of becoming an architect.

Today, at the age of 83, I remember a few details of my time at Stuyvesant. Our history teacher had been gassed in World War I. We studied English literature, history, geometry, trigonometry, French, biology. Social studies had not yet invaded the schools of New York. But then I remember learning that colonialism was a bad thing, even

though multiculturalism was unheard of. There was no such thing as sex ed. And so I was given about as decent and moral an education as anyone could have had in the 1940s..

My family's concern at the time was the fate of our relatives in Poland. My parents had come to the U. S. in the 1920s and they became strongly patriotic Americans, grateful for a chance to live life in freedom. The Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939 put an end to any plans to bring some of those relatives to America. They were trapped between the Nazis and Communists, and were doomed. Thus, it was easy for me to know something of geography and history as the tragedy in Europe unfolded.

The attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese took place on December 7, 1941. I was then 15 years old, too young for the draft. My two older brothers however went into the service. There was no doubt in anyone's mind in those days that we would win the war, and the nation was mobilized to do just that.

But in 1944, during my senior year at Stuyvesant, I reached draft age. One of my teachers urged me to join the Army Specialized Training Program instead of waiting to be drafted. The ASTP program opened doors to better military assignments. So I joined. Believe it or not, I was sent to the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington, Virginia, where I studied as a military cadet for a semester. It was a fantastic experience, the first time I was able to see what another part of America was like. One of my fellow cadets was the individual who became Mel Brooks, the comedian superstar.

Since I did not exhibit any great military talents, I was sent from VMI to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for basic training in the artillery. That too was a great travel experience. In early 1945, I was assigned to an artillery unit to be sent to Italy. We boarded our transport at Newport News and arrived in Italy in March. We encamped near Pisa, in preparation for combat in the Appenine mountains near Bologna. Once in place, we began pounding the German lines.

During that period, we had one casualty. One of our shells exploded at it exited the cannon killing one of our men, Franklin Pierce Plummer III. I would never forget his name. He was a nice unassuming guy from upstate New York.

In April, the German lines crumbled and the enemy began a hurried retreat into the Po Valley. Large German units began surrendering, and by May the war in Europe was over. I was then transferred to an infantry unit which occupied northern Italy. I became a clerk-typist. Apparently my touch-typing ability, which I acquired in junior high school, landed me the job. Moral of the story: you never know where your abilities will take you.